



*THE CENTAUR'S*  
**SECRET**  
*WAITING HEARTS: CENTAURS - BOOK ONE*

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# **The Centaur's Secret**



## **Waiting Hearts World: Centaurs**

Book 1

Jena Wade & Lorelei M. Hart

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Published in the United States of America

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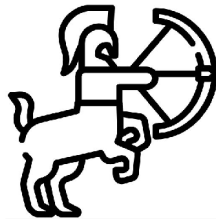
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# Chapter 1

Maddox



I looked around me, soaking in the memories of my temporary home. When I arrived, the pride welcomed me, not asking more questions from me than I'd been willing to answer. But the time had come to be on my way. I wasn't sure how I knew that tonight was the night, but I did.

The room I was in, the one they had given me, was comfortable. I'd give them that. It had a ton of space, and there were people to chat with when I wanted that, and quiet solitude when that was what I needed. And really, everyone here, guests and pride alike, had been welcoming and kind.

The pride was sensitive to my trauma and I appreciated it. But not once did I feel infantilized or like they had kid gloves on. I was just Maddox, a guest. I appreciated it more than they could know.

By all accounts, this was a safe space for me to be in—safer than anywhere else. But I wasn't looking for safety. I was looking for a place to regroup and begin my journey—the one towards my future.

If only it were that easy for my cat. But my beast? He felt so caged, so locked inside. There was no calming him as long as we were here, and I wasn't sure that to do about that. Maybe there was nothing that even could be done. It was a good thing my time here was just about over.

My only regret was that I hadn't reached out to my friend, Kian, to explain what had happened and why I hadn't met him when I was supposed to. There was no way he wasn't worried about me, and I hated that for him. But my fucking brother interfered just like he always fucking did. Gods, I hated him. Even now that he was dead, I hated him. How could the two of us be related, when his heart was so dark?

Kian was now comfortable with his mate, and his brother Gideon was alive. Unlike mine, not that I had spent a lot of time mourning my brother's death—not any time, really. In a sick way, I was happy about it.

And really, it was inevitable with his behavior. There was no saving the man, and the world was a better place without him. If that made me a bad person, well, so be it. Jaden had been cruel, and he'd used others' weaknesses to his advantage. He'd done some truly horrible things, and I shuddered to think about what he'd done that I hadn't even been aware of. But even

with him gone, I couldn't go back. There wasn't a pride to go back to even if that was what I wanted.

Ever since I was but a kitten, I'd always felt slightly out of place within my own pride. I never belonged there. And it wasn't as if everyone was cruel like my brother. I had Kian and a few others. No. It was deeper than just making connections. At first, I thought maybe leaving the new territory would help. But each day, the feeling inside me intensified, as if my skin was wrong. My heart yearned for something else out there.

The forest.

Which made no goddamn sense. I was a lion. I liked open plains and heat, somewhere I could bask in the sun. The place I dreamed of was a lush forest with greenery and shade, where the sun barely peeked through the canopy of trees. But the call to the forest only got stronger with time, to the point I could no longer ignore it.

Objectively, it was irrational, and yet nothing in my being saw it as such. It was what I longed for my entire life—the place I had dreamed of. And lately, for the past year, really, the place I had dreamed of always had *him* there. I couldn't picture his face. I couldn't picture his body. I just knew he was broad shouldered and strong, and he loved the earth as much as I did.

In my dreams, I held on to him tightly as we raced across the forest. He could leap and jump over things that I couldn't imagine. He was on four legs, while somehow maintaining his



human form. It didn't make sense to me at first, but what about dreams did?

Then one day I unlocked a memory, one where I was a school boy being nose-y and reading books not meant for kids. It was there that I first discovered the word centaur... a half human, half horse being. I'd been so excited, running to my teacher and asking him if I could meet one and where the local herd was, only to be let down.

There weren't shifters like that anywhere. Centaurs weren't even real. This creature lived only in my night wanderings.

I'd been heartbroken, and my teacher did his best to curb my disappointment. He told me that humans wanted them to be real too, that centaurs were their way of answering some questions for which they had no answers. I hated every bit of the explanation, wanting him to be wrong so badly. I wasn't sure what had me so intrigued by centaurs so young, but the connection I felt to them was so strong. I even set out to prove my teacher wrong and did a little digging in shifter history.

But he wasn't wrong, and it sucked. Every source I could find, even those I wasn't meant to have access to, confirmed it. Centaurs weren't real. If there ever had been any centaurs, we would know that by now. They only existed in human imaginations.

I never forgot about them, and lately it was they who filled my dreams. Or rather, one of them. He was always the same, and I was sure of it, even if I couldn't see him clearly. He was there, in my mind's eye. He felt so real, and recently he felt like

more than just a random centaur in my dreams—he was my mate. I had a centaur mate. Or I was completely losing it. One of the two.

The need to find my centaur, my mate, eventually became too strong. I was nearly going mad with it. Which was why my bag was packed. I was leaving the safety of the pride that had helped me escape my brother's wrath and the hellish place he called a pride.

I couldn't tell them why. I couldn't tell them where I was going. I couldn't even tell them goodbye. I just had to leave. I had within my possession the journal I needed, the one I stole from my brother's office. It had been the first hint that my centaur might be real and held some clues to where I was going. It was just a piece to the puzzle, not the solution, but I was grateful for it.

My heart would tell me more. I just needed to follow it. And today I was doing just that. No more waiting for the perfect time. I needed to get to him. My beast needed to get to him.

Not for the first time I thought I should call Kian. I wanted to, but I knew he would try to talk me out of going on this adventure. He had thought I was crazy talking about beasts that didn't exist. He was my closest and best friend, but even with him I had started to hide my dreams. I hated that, but it only upset him. He thought all of it was a trauma response, and I got that. I did. Our lives hadn't been sunshine and roses. But this wasn't that.

They did exist. I knew they did deep down in my being, and I refused to deny it any longer. I even knew somehow that there was more than just my mate out there. Recently I realized that my mate wasn't alone, that the muffled voices I heard weren't all from the same being. There were three of them. I felt it in my heart. Even if I couldn't put it into words.

Closing my eyes, I settled myself enough to begin my journey. It was the only way to be safe, and what was the point of looking for them if I died along the way? I wrapped the bag around my shoulders, like I'd been doing my whole life. It was how I could travel with a backpack while in my lion form. I couldn't carry much, but I didn't need a lot. As long as I had my journal, I'd be fine. It was my compass. I couldn't be lost with it there to guide me.

I shifted and leaped out of the window, pleased that the cabins were designed with our beasts in mind. The pride would find that I was gone in the morning, and perhaps they would even follow my trail. But I would be long gone. There would be no finding me. I would either go mad with my search or find what I was looking for, and for the first time feel like I belonged somewhere.

# Chapter 2

Terran



I trotted aimlessly through the forest. It had been years since our scenery had changed. Though by years, I really meant decades, since time passed for us very differently than it did for the rest of the world. There were times when I loved that it did and others when I wished that I was on the human timeline. Immortality was what so many humans longed for, but they didn't see the dark side, the loneliness that came with the world moving on as you were at a standstill.

Every few years, the scenery around us would change, as if whatever being was out there that knew we were here wanted us to have something fresh and different. Or maybe I was reading too much into it. Either way, neither my brothers nor I really cared. To us, everything sort of blended together. Perhaps if I had been stuck in the same environment for the past one thousand years, then I would complain.

This forest, though, I knew like the back of my hand. It was like an extension of myself. There wasn't much else for us to do here except enjoy the land we had been given to roam. We wandered, built our homes, and peeked into the human world whenever we could, which wasn't very often. That was about it. It wasn't a fancy or exciting life, but it was ours.

Years ago, not long after we were created, the three of us made the decision to be put where we were now, to keep humanity and shifters safe. We weren't meant to be here on this planet. Not really. Staying out of the way of the creatures who were felt most prudent.

Our creators, our parents for lack of a better term, had been punished for their deeds. I understood why. Messing with the order of things was asking for trouble. Thankfully, for my brothers and I, the governing body at the time hadn't wanted to put us down. Well, not all of them, not enough to reach a consensus. So here we were, wandering aimlessly through an ever-changing forest for eternity.

Had they had a consensus that day, our existence and all memories of it would've been snuffed out. And as far as the memories part went, I was fairly confident that that had happened regardless. Memories became stories became lore became nothing. It was the way of things. By now, not a single shifter in existence knew of us. Even the current governing body likely had no idea the secrets that lay in their own archives.

What surprised me was not that they didn't want creatures created instead of born to not exist. That would have made sense. But it had nothing to do with that, and everything to do with our bodies. Who knew shifters or humanity in general couldn't handle the idea of the form that we had?

A human torso, but the body of a horse, hooves included, was too much to handle for shifter-kind. They could change from a human to a mouse or lion or alligator no problem, but hooves instead of feet? That was where they drew their line.

My tail flicked in irritation just thinking about it. And sure, it was more than the hooves... probably. Shifters were far more human-like than they wanted to believe, and there were so many bits and pieces that concerned them. Heaven forbid you turn into half of one animal and half of your human form. And maybe it was because we didn't have fully human forms. Whatever it was, me thinking about it was only making me cross and for what? It wasn't as if anyone who made those decisions back then was still here with us. They had long since returned to dust.

My brother Luan thought our ability to shift to two legs was not absent from our lives, but thwarted. He said it was latent, only with a catch. He believed our human forms would come when we met our mates.

I rolled my eyes at that. How could we have fated mates when we weren't supposed to exist in the first place? We couldn't.

Luan had always been the dreamer of us. More nocturnal in nature than both myself and Apollo, Luan spent his nights

gazing at the stars. In the morning, he would regale us with tales of the human world that he saw. He would talk about what the future might hold for us.

In a way, I was jealous of him. I had long since given up on a future, and living knowing you weren't going to have one was painful, despite trying to convince myself otherwise.

While I wasn't one to gaze into the stars, I did try to enjoy the moment, the dirt beneath my hooves, the wind in my hair. As I walked, the forest came alive with other creatures. We weren't alone here. There were smaller animals, squirrels, rabbits, and such. They were drawn to me, much like the stars were drawn to Luan.

I drew my strength from the earth, and Luan from the moon, and then there was Apollo... He burned bright like the sun and had a temper to match. His temper over the years had gotten to the point where we'd fought and I hadn't seen him for nearly a year, which was more like a decade in human time. Eventually, we had made up, and now that I think of it, I couldn't even recall what the argument had been about. Time had a way of erasing even our memories.

I circled back and made my way back to the home that I had built. This was my third one in the forest. I built it with logs I had cut and milled on my own. The entire building had been built with my own two hands. It had a thatched roof and deep green vines that grew up the exterior. It was homey, something I longed for.

My brothers hated it.

Of course, Luan preferred his home to be a cave, giving him the darkness he needed to sleep during the day, allowing him to enjoy his nights under the moon. And Apollo just kept to himself, his house more of a lean-to than a home. I'd been to his version a time or two, and it was about as warm and inviting as Apollo's attitude.

As I reached the clearing that I called home, I was surprised to see my brothers. They were both there, standing outside as if they had been waiting for me. It had been many years since I'd seen them both there like that, and it was a bit unsettling.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Luan's convinced there's been a shift," Apollo said.

I stopped in my tracks. My tail flicked with irritation again. All I really wanted was to enjoy my lunch and take a nap. I felt one coming on that might last a longer time. It happened. Not often, but enough that I no longer feared it.

"Haven't you noticed that we've been experiencing time differently?" Luan asked.

I cocked my head to the side. "Not really." Or if I did, I had excused it away. It wouldn't be the first time.

Luan rolled his eyes. "Do you two ever peek into the human world for more than a few moments?"

I shook my head. Did I find them fascinating? Absolutely. But watching them always left me sad. They lived a full life, and here I was, going through the motions year after year.

"Mother's journals—"



Apollo growled. He didn't like it when I called her mother. Fuck that noise. She might not have given birth to us, and there are plenty of arguments over why she shouldn't have created us in the first place. That didn't change the fact that she was our mother, like it or not.

Luan rolled his eyes. "Our creator's journals have been opened. The secrets revealed. The time has come."

"For what? The shifter world to put us down?" I asked. It wouldn't surprise me. People feared that which they did not understand, and us still walking the forest was something they would not understand.

"Would that be so terrible to end this meaningless existence?" Apollo asked, and I hated how sincere he sounded. We might not always get along, but he was my brother and I loved him.

I also hated that I saw his point. I didn't want to die, but what the hell was I living for? Going through the motions was just that. And at some point, enough was enough.

"It won't be like that," Luan said.

"Oh yeah. And what's it going to be like?" Apollo asked. The deep red in his horns turned a shade darker as he spoke. Of the three of us, he was closest to being the weapon that our creators had been striving for when we were made. Even still, I doubted Apollo would hurt a fly, let alone another person.

"I don't know. But I know your mate will come for you first." Luan looked at me. It sucked when he talked that way, giving

us false glimmers of hope. He meant well, but that didn't make the hurt any less.

"Me?" I said. I scoffed and shifted my hooves. The wet dirt squished beneath them. "I wish you would get the idea of mates out of your head. I know it sounds great, but we just don't have them. They aren't for us. We aren't even supposed to exist."

"We do, they are, and we are. All of us. But it will come at a price." He wasn't making it sound any better.

"And that price is?" I asked.

Luan shrugged. "I don't know for certain. The stars haven't told me yet."

"Great, well, when they do, let me know."

I moved to walk past them and straight into my home, but just then, it was as if a ripple worked its way through the forest, and we all stumbled as we reoriented ourselves to the world. He was right. Something was happening. Something big.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Someone has crossed the threshold. Your mate is here."

"In the forest?" I nearly yelled. Luan might be talking crazy, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off kilter.

"Yes. Whether you want to admit it or not, he is here."

I took off like a shot. I didn't believe him, not really, but what if he was right and I ignored him? What if I gave up on my one shot at happiness? And then there was the more likely

scenario that someone crossed into our lands, and we needed to figure out what the heck to do about it. In theory, no one should be able to, and any who came close would be disoriented and end up lost elsewhere. No one should be here.

And yet someone was. We all felt it.

I galloped at full speed, my body sensing where to go as if on autopilot. And then I saw them, the intruder. Only it wasn't a person. Not at first. Standing there in the forest was a lion.

Coming to a halt, I watched as he shifted from beast to human. And not just any human. This man stole my breath away, and as the breeze tickled past my nose, I saw for the very first time that my brother was right.

This lion—this man—he was my mate. How the fuck was that even going to work?

# Chapter 3

Maddox



I froze, unsure if what I was seeing was real or if I had fallen asleep. I had been travelling for so longewsdzx, I wasn't even sure how long I'd been on my own. Had I gone mad? I had no name for what and who I was looking at. Yet at the same time, he was so familiar, almost as if I were coming home.

*Centaur.*

Blinking rapidly, I tried to make sure the creature I was seeing was actually there and not all in my head. He remained right where he was, not moving, watching me as I was watching him.

The man... the creature... the beast stood before me. He stood on four legs, his body that of a horse, but his torso was human, a shirtless, sexy human with one exception—on his head was a pair of antlers. His hooves were huge, and I hated myself for

thinking about the human phrase connecting foot size to dick size. I wasn't supposed to be here thinking dirty thoughts. I had a feeling I wasn't supposed to be standing here at all. Like I was in a place that was meant to be unseen.

I snapped my head up to look into his eyes. They locked with mine, and he stared at me as if he had been waiting for me and for me alone. It was intimate in a way that had me both filled with unease and butterflies. The spell between us broke as a twig broke behind him.

He was quickly flanked by two more creatures just like him, or sort of like him. One stared at me through his dark eyes. It was as if they glowed red. The other had skin that was pale and glowed like moonlight. His eyes were kind as he looked me over, unlike the other.

“Who are you?” the first one asked. He was the one whose eyes I couldn't look away from, the one I longed to walk up to and inhale his scent. His gaze had me pinned in place, but I wasn't scared. Not of him.

“Maddox,” I said. My voice echoed through the forest. The world around us went still.

“What business do you have here?” he asked with no hint of intimidation, like the shifters would've had in my old pride when a stranger arrived. He simply wanted to know, and I wished I had an answer for him.

“I don't know,” I said.

I took one step forward, and the hum that had started in my heart when I entered this forest grew even louder. It was as if there was an invisible rope tying me to the creature in front of me. It pulled tight and beckoned me forward. I felt nothing similar about the others. It was almost as if they weren't even there.

“You're real?” I said, looking at the three of them. “Like real real.” It took all I had not to reach over and touch the man in front of me... beast... I wasn't even sure of the right word.

The angry one narrowed his eyes. “No, we're not. We're just a hallucination. Turn and go back to where you came from. Forget you ever saw anything.”

My gaze scrambled back to the other one. The pureness of his soul radiated from him. Did he want me to leave? Because nothing about me wanted to, and there was no way that the angry one could gaslight me into thinking this was all in my imagination. It was my fault for opening the door to that possibility by asking a question I obviously knew the answer to.

Instead of answering me, he took one tentative step forward, his hooves digging into the dirt. He was as nervous as I was. Was it for the same reason? Did he feel this connection, too?

I stepped forward again, closing the space between us. I longed to touch him, and the desire was overpowering. Shifters touching another shifter in their second form was unheard of unless you were mates. But was this even his second form? There were so many more questions than

answers, and none of them mattered to me as much as touching him.

*He is our mate*, my lion argued.

*Yes, mate*. Another voice echoed inside my head, one I did not recognize, and it startled me. It seemed to startle him as well.

“I’m Terran,” he said, his voice the same as the one in my head. He’d spoken to me or to my beast. I wasn’t sure which. But he’d done it, and suddenly all the pieces of my dreams rushed into me.

“It’s you.” I locked eyes with him, “I’ve been looking for you. I’ve been dreaming of you.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. He gestured down to himself.

“Well, I mean, not quite... I guess I didn’t know that you were a centaur. Not for sure,” I said, hating how I was fumbling this all. “I didn’t know those existed in real life. Everyone told me you weren’t real.”

“Is that the name that the humans gave us?” Terran asked.

“I think so.” Standing here now, seeing him in his glory, I wasn’t so sure that the term fit. “Do you have a name for yourself?”

Terran shook his head. “No. Our creator didn’t bother with names for her creatures. Centaur fits just fine. And you are?”

“I’m a lion. That’s my other form.” Did they know about shifters?

He nodded and looked me over. “Yes, I can see that. I see the shadow of your animal form in your gaze.”

We were just inches from each other now, and it was only us there. The rest of the world didn’t matter.

“Really?”

“Really.” Terran reached a hand out and cupped my cheek. When his skin touched mine, it was as if the world stopped. The humming that had filled my body and pounded against my ears came to a standstill, and there was silence. Even the forest went quiet.

“What the hell just happened?” the angry one said.

“A connection has been made,” the nice one said.

“My brother is right. You should turn around and leave,” Terran said, and my heart nearly stopped. He couldn’t ask that of me. We just met after I worked so hard to find him. But he didn’t know any of that. All he knew was a stranger had walked onto his land and pissed off his brother.

“Is that what you want?” I asked, my voice cracking.

He shook his head. “No, never. I’m afraid I cannot let you go.”

The idea should’ve terrified me. But it did anything but. It had been a long time since anyone had cared about me and my wellbeing. Of course, Kian cared. He was my friend, but he had his mate now, and I wanted something like that.

*Mate.*



“I’m your mate?” Terran said. “Is that what your beast is calling me?”

I nodded.

“He is right. I never thought it possible. Luan told me it was, but I did not believe him. But you are mine.” He was almost talking to himself more than me, as if he wasn’t quite sure of what he was thinking and processing it out loud.

“Yes,” I said.

“Oh, for goddess’ sake. I can’t imagine this is going to end well.” The mean one stomped one of his hooves.

Terran turned towards his brother with a growl and I took a step back. The hum that had radiated through my body returned once I stopped touching Terran. It pounded against my ears and my skin prickled with pain, like little, tiny needles. I cried out and Terran turned back to me.

“Maddox!” he said.

“I’m fine. I think...”

He held a hand out to me, and I grabbed it. The humming stopped. “Wait... Do you..?”

“Yes,” he said. “I feel it, too.”

“It’s a heart song. Your souls are connecting, recognizing their partners, and they’re singing out to one another,” Luan said.

“And if we let go?” I said, pulling my hand away experimentally. The hum returned again, only this time it was less painful.

“Come on.” Terran touched my hand again. The humming stopped. “Let me take you to my home and get you settled. You have traveled far. I assume that you are hungry.”

“I could eat,” I said. “I don’t suppose you have a pizza restaurant around here. I could go for a deep dish.” I could actually eat just about anything right then. My lion and I had survived on hunting alone for quite a lot of the journey.

All three of them looked at me, eyebrows cocked in question.

“I’m going to take that as a no.” And really, I only asked out of nerves.

“Wait, he is staying?” the angry one asked.

“Don’t mind Apollo. He’ll warm up to you. Eventually,” Terran said.

Apollo. The angry one had a name.

Apollo’s eyes narrowed, but the anger seemed to deflate from him. “He’s your responsibility, Terran.”

“Of course.” Terran waved him away. “I have a stew simmering at my home.”

“Oh,” I said. “How are you all here?”

“Time works differently for us here. At least it did,” he explained.

“Is this a different realm?” I asked, half wondering if that feeling when I stepped into their land was less about Terran and more about walking through a veil.

Luan cocked his head to the side, seeming to ponder my question. “No, I don’t think realm is the right way of thinking of it. This forest occupies space in the world that you know. It doesn’t exist outside of it. It’s just that we experience time differently.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“We never counted,” Terran said.

“A hundred years?”

He shook his head. “Multiply that by a ten or so. It’s probably closer to a thousand.”

“Oh damn,” I said. “You don’t age.”

“No.” There was a sadness to his answer, and all I wanted to do was give him a hug.

“Oh damn,” I said again. I let go of Terran’s hand and ran my hand through my hair. The hum came back and my skin prickled.

“Please stop doing that, mate. You are only causing us pain when I’m not touching you.”

“This is a bit to digest, Terran.” I took his hand though.

I felt better holding it. But how long would I continue doing so? It wasn’t like I could hold his hand all of the time.

“For all of us. We can figure things out at home after you eat.” He gave my hand a squeeze. “I feel the need to take care of you after your journey.”

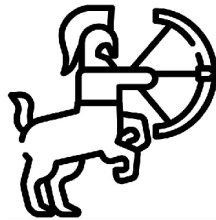
Apollo grumbled in the background, but I didn't pay attention enough to even hear his words. This was all about Terran and me. The rest could sit on the back burner.

“Yeah. Let's go home... I mean your home.”

“Yes. Let's go home.”

# Chapter 4

Terran



My mate followed closely behind me as we walked through the dense forest. I hated that I didn't have my hands on him and hated even more that he was growing tired throughout the journey. He had traveled for so long to find me, and here I was making him trek even farther to my home. He hadn't told me of his long journey, but I *felt* it.

I stopped and turned. "Would you like to climb on my back?" I offered.

Those were words I never thought I'd say. I wasn't a beast of burden, I was Terran, one of the three centaurs. Carrying a human to a destination was not something I'd have even considered a possibility before. Not that I ever came in contact with anyone besides my brothers, and they most certainly weren't riding on my back. But this was my mate. For some

reason it felt right to offer, almost as if it were an honor to be able to gift him the ride.

Maddox's eyes widened, and his gaze roved to the sway of my back. "Is that something I can do?" he said. He put a hand out tentatively, lightly touching the shoulder of my beast. "Something you would want me to do?"

Instantly it was as if my body righted itself again. My skin was no longer tight and itchy. His body touching mine, even in this small way, was what I longed for... needed.

"Of course," I said. "We'll be more comfortable if we're touching, I think."

He let out a long sigh. "Yes. You feel it, too?"

I nodded. "Very much so."

"Will it always be like that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I suspect Luan might have an idea." I've bent one of my front legs, getting down lower so that Maddox could climb on my back and settle himself. I wasn't sure if he'd ever ridden a horse and if this would be enough, but it was what I could offer. Not that I was a horse. But the same principles applied.

He climbed on with ease, being ever so gentle as he did. Once he was settled, I righted myself. It wasn't as uncomfortable as I had imagined it would be, and in fact, it was nice. Probably because he was my mate.

"Are you all right?" I asked, not wanting to take a step before I knew he felt safely in place.

He wrapped his arms around my torso, his breath hot on my neck. It felt good. Too good.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” he said.

My body responded to my mate’s touch. His thighs straddled my back and my cock thickened at the connection. It was embarrassing, but also out of my control. This mate thing was going to take some getting used to.

“It’s a long way. This is best,” I assured him, hoping that I was right and that trotting back home with a big ass erection wasn’t going to cause issues of discomfort for me.

“If you’re sure. Maybe you can tell me more about you and how you came to be?” he asked. “Unless you’d rather wait till we get to your home. I don’t want to distract you if you need to concentrate on getting through the forest.”

I chuckled. “I need a distraction. My beast likes how close you are a little too much. I have nothing but time, love. And I’ve made this trek through this forest more times than I can count. This one has been with us for a while.”

“This one?” he said.

I grinned. “We don’t understand it completely either, but our forest changes sometimes. Our houses stay, but the surroundings are different.” At first we tried to figure it out, but over time we realized it was easiest just to accept the gifts that we had been given and to call it good.

“Oh,” he said, and I could practically see the furrow in his brow. “So you all have just lived here by yourself ever since

you were born?”

“Created,” I corrected. “You’ve mentioned the journals. I assume that you know of our creator and her mate.”

“Some,” Maddox said. “I was with a pride... My brother got so consumed with gaining power, and he used the journals and the recipes in them to try and get that power. It did not go well for him. There are others out there, too, who have access to those recipes.”

I hummed, not loving the sound of that but not wanting to put my mate ill at ease. It was something that Luan would want to know and possibly he would have an idea about how to handle it. If our creators’ secrets had been revealed, then all wasn’t well with the shifter world. It was a serious concern.

“Our creator was consumed with her need for revenge on all of shifter kind. It became her undoing. Anyone who pursues those recipes and that power trying to build those weapons is going to find themselves in a similar fate.”

“How is it that you were created but you don’t have the same feelings as your Creator? I assume her intended purpose for you was to help with her revenge.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Perhaps we were given our own minds by the Goddess. There are others, not beasts like me and my brothers, but other little experiments that our creator did.”

“I haven’t heard of any.”

“That was our intent when we decided to seclude ourselves in the forest for the sake of shifter kind. The others would be



safe,” I said. “Luan might know more about that, too.” And I would learn. It had been too easy for me to ignore the history before, but now, not being able to answer my mate’s questions wasn’t enjoyable.

“Is he the more studious one of you all?”

“Studious? Yes, that is a good way to put it. He likes to take peeks into the human world and gain more knowledge. He’s the only reason we know as much as we do about it. Which isn’t much at all. It’s how we learn about things that you have. Like cars, electricity, and that internet thing.”

“Yes.” Maddox giggled. “That internet thing.”

We came upon my home and Maddox sucked in a breath as he looked it over.

I suddenly had a feeling of inadequacy. It was new to me. I’d never had to compete for anything. My brothers and I all had the same resources available to us. There was no competition there. But this was the very first time that I was showing my home off to someone who grew up completely different than I did and beyond that, it was someone I never wanted to disappoint. That wasn’t the way of things, but still... it was my goal.

“It’s beautiful, Terran. I love it,” Maddox said.

“It’s different than what you’re used to. Perhaps smaller, or not as fancy.”

“I don’t care,” he said. “You’re here, right? You’ll stay with me. Or I can stay with you.”

I loved how easily he accepted this all. Or maybe easily wasn't the right word. He worked hard to get here. He managed to do what no other mortal had, all to find me, his mate.

"Absolutely," I said. "I'd love nothing more."

Maddox swung down and his feet landed on the ground. His arm didn't leave my side. He still longed to be in contact with me, and it had my heart soaring.

His head only came up to my shoulder, and I wished then for just a moment that I was on two legs, that I could embrace him as a man embraces his mate, that we could join together the way mates did. That we could be truly compatible even if for just a bit of time.

My body began to tingle, my heart pounding, my senses on overload and then not. It was as if my world was rotating on its axis, and up was becoming down and left was becoming right.

I blinked, the world becoming blurry, and as it cleared, I found myself looking at the world from a different angle. I was standing there on two legs, staring at my mate. My wish had come true. I was in human form.

He took a step back, looking at me with new eyes, nowhere near as surprised by the shift I'd just gone through than I was. But then again, he was two beings in one. It would make sense to him. Only I wasn't two beings, I was just me, Terran, and yet here I was on two feet instead of four hooves.

"I didn't realize you had two forms," he said with wonder.

“I didn’t...” I said. “I don’t. I mean, not until just now. I was just wishing that I could be like you so that I could hug you.”

“Will you go back?” He sounded sad at the loss of my centaur form. “Or are you stuck like this?”

“I don’t think I’m stuck, but I don’t know how long I’ll be like this. It’s all new to me.”

“We should get that hug then.” He smiled softly.

I pulled him into my arms. “And maybe a kiss, mate?”

“Yes,” he said in a breathless whisper. “Please.”

He stepped into my arms and I held him tightly, his arms wrapped around me, his nose where my neck reached my shoulder, scenting me deeply. It was so intimate and affectionate in a way I’d never experienced before, and I’d have died the happiest of beings right there in his arms.

He pulled his head back. “Hi.” He pressed his forehead against mine.

“Hi, mate.”

He leaned his lips in gently, brushing them against my own. It was my first kiss ever, and while I was beyond nervous that I’d mess it up or do it somehow wrong, it also felt completely right. I brushed mine against his in the same fashion, loving the way my mouth seemed to know exactly what to do.

I’d never given much thought to kissing. I’d seen the act, long ago when I’d been among the other shifters, but it was never something I craved. Until now.

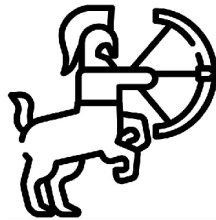
We moved together like this, sweet and warm, but it didn't stay that way. The kiss moved deeper. I couldn't explain how I knew that was what was happening, but I did. And then his tongue licked the seam of my mouth and I opened up to him, and suddenly it wasn't just connecting to my mate, it was exploring him, my cock growing stiff between us. I should've been embarrassed standing there all hard for him, but I wasn't. I could never be embarrassed by the way my mate made me feel.

And then once again, our foreheads were touching, we were both out of breath, and my mate was holding onto me, scenting me once more. His mouth traveled up to my ear. "Maybe you should show me inside before you aren't the only one here naked."

I wasn't sure the downside of that, but stepped back and took his hand and brought him inside what I hoped would become his new home.

# Chapter 5

Maddox



“So, you just wished it, and it happened.” Luan narrowed his eyes, clearly skeptical that Terran wished to have two legs and then suddenly he had them.

For a person who knew of our world—of shifters—he didn’t seem to trust that he and his brothers could be similar. At least that was the impression I got. But maybe he was just being a dick to his brother. Brothers could be like that, something I knew entirely too well.

“Yes,” Terran said for the fifth time.

Luan and Apollo had begun asking questions the minute that they walked in the front door and hadn’t stopped yet. He and Apollo had come for dinner. I wasn’t sure how it had been decided that we were all having dinner together at Terran’s home, but here we were. Maybe they always dined here. There

was so much I didn't know about my mate and his life. We hadn't had a chance to talk after I had looked around his house, before his brothers had shown up. But I knew one thing: he was mine, and I had the rest of my days to learn everything there was to know about him.

It wasn't a normal dinner table setting that I was used to. There were no chairs. The table was lowered to the ground and the three of them lay on the ground with their four legs tucked underneath them, and ate. It was kind of homey and comfortable. I was able to sit next to my mate and bask in his warmth.

"Do you guys frequently have dinner together?" I asked, hoping to change the subject and learn about my mate in one question.

"Not as much as we'd like to," Luan said.

"Often enough," Apollo said at the same time.

Terran laughed. "Apollo prefers to keep to himself. Luan is a more social creature. And questions everything."

The affection Terran had for his brothers gave me a pang of jealousy. My brother had been evil—literally evil in the end. Sure, he had messed with darkness, but if I were being honest with myself, he'd never been a good guy. And that sucked. But these three? They might disagree on things, but their love for each other was evident in all they did... at least so far.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," I said, swirling around the cup that I held. I took a drink, and the rich flavors burst on my tongue.

I couldn't quite pinpoint all of them. Raspberry, maybe mint?  
"What is this? It's very sweet."

"Just water with some berries immersed in," Terran said.

"You broke out the fancy stuff now that your mate is here."  
Apollo snorted. He broke off a piece of the bread and munched on it.

I smiled at Terran. I wasn't sure if Apollo's assessment was accurate, but I was going with it was and that my mate did little things just to make me happy. I planned to do the same for him. It was official, I was a mushy pile of goo over this man I met only a handful of hours earlier, and I wouldn't change a thing.

The dinner was great. He'd made a stew, venison by the taste of it. Venison was one of my all time faves, the perfect meal for our first together.

"Maybe I did bring out the fancy," he countered, not even bothered by his brother's jab. "If nothing else, you're going to have to build my mate a chair." Was Apollo the carpenter of the group?

"I don't mind sitting on the ground," I said, leaning into my mate. There was an intimacy to eating like this. I enjoyed it.

"We'll see. It's not as if we can all just stay here for eternity," Luan said.

Terran and Apollo both look to him. "Why not?"

"Can't you feel it? Time is not flying for us anymore. It is at regular speed, the speed at which the outside world

experiences it, and we have your mate here. Surely you can see that means it's time for us to leave the forest." Luan said it as fact, but his brothers looked at him as if he had five heads.

"No," Apollo said, tossing down the napkin. "No. Not happening. We're staying."

"Why would we need to leave?" I asked, enough parts of their conversation missing to make it impossible for me to get the complete picture.

Luan's gaze bore into mine. "You can't possibly want to stay here forever."

Terran squeezed my hand.

"Honestly, that sounds heavenly." The outside world hadn't been overly kind to me, and this place was very much like a paradise. And besides, my mate was here. Where else would I long to be?

Luan's brow furrowed. "There's so much I want to know out there... to experience, and if I have a mate out there, I'd want to find them."

"Maybe they'll come stumbling in like I did."

Luan shook his head. "No, I don't sense that that's going to happen." He bit his lip and his voice lowered. Was he psychic? Did he know things? Had he sensed me coming before I did?

Terran held me close. "We can stay for as long as you'd like, mate. But if you do need to return to the outside world, I will go with you." He looked at me as if questioning if he should continue. He must've seen the answer because he carried on.



“We’ll figure it out. I can’t imagine the council or whoever is in charge these days would be too happy to learn that we have resurfaced. Just because our creators’ journals have made a reappearance doesn’t mean they’ll want the creatures to come forward. And if they start asking questions about us, they’ll ask questions about the others. We’d risk exposing them.”

“Others?” I asked. They had mentioned others before, but I didn’t get many details.

“Not beasts like us, but more like variations on regular shifters. It’s complicated.” Terran’s words only managed to confuse me even more.

“What if the two of you have children?” Luan asked.

My cheeks heated. “I just got here. He hasn’t even bought me dinner yet.”

Apollo laughed. “I like him. At least he has a little spunk.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Luan, why don’t you let us answer those questions before you go off half cocked out into the world. It’s not like you to be so impatient.” Apollo took a long sip of his drink.

“I know,” he said. “It’s just I have a lot of questions about the outside world. Things I’ve peeked into, but don’t know. And well... aren’t you two lonely here? Just the three of us? Especially if time is going to crawl like it is now.”

Apollo sighed. “I will admit one time, don’t ask me to say it again, but yes, it does grow lonely. The two of you are great

company, most of the time, but a little variety wouldn't hurt. And I wouldn't be opposed to meeting my mate."

He said the last part so quiet it was only due to my shifter hearing that I heard it at all. They'd been here so long, just the three of them. It had to be beyond lonely. And then learning you could have a mate out there and that it wasn't a pipe dream... my heart hurt for my mate's brothers.

"Nothing needs to be decided today," Terran said.

"And I appreciate that." I just got here. I was not ready to leave. This place was paradise as far as I could tell. And after all the travelling I'd done, I was ready to just be for a while.

"What do you think, Maddox? Would the shifter world be accepting of us? We would have known if there was any exposure to humans, so we have to assume that they have kept their secret," Luan asked.

"Yeah, of course." I spoke too quickly, not thinking about it long enough. "I mean, there's been instances, but for the most part, humans don't know about us. I honestly think it wouldn't be a huge deal if you all came out and showed the world who you were. The shifter world. Things aren't perfect. My pride was pretty terrible. But most others aren't that awful. My friend, actually, he's in a very nice pride. They provide a better place for omegas."

"Omegas are still treated like second class citizens, then?" Apollo asked. The irritation that was usually in his voice spiked a bit higher. I didn't blame him.

“Not as a rule no, there are still some alphas who think they’re boss, but there are omegas out there that are terrible also. We have the council who keeps things in order, and they have enforcer packs that keep them in order. And then there are also packs that provide shelter to those who need it. The rest are just packs or prides or leaps or whatever that go about their day normally.” I managed to make things sound a thousand times more complicated than they needed to be.

“And you don’t have one of those right now? A pride?” Luan asked.

“I do not. They are no more. My brother... well, let’s say it was ultimately disbanded after shit with him went down. I don’t have all the details, but I heard rumors on my journey here.” I hated it, and more than once I wondered if things would be different if I had stayed. Ultimately I determined it wouldn’t have been. And worse than that, I wouldn’t have found my mate.

“You do now. With us,” Terran said and squeezed my hand. “For however long you want to stay here, we will be your pack.”

“Is that what you are called? A pack?”

“We hadn’t really thought of an official name.” Luan rubbed his chin. “I suppose we would be a herd?”

“A herd... hmmm, I kind of like that,” Apollo said.

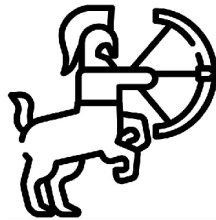
“Agreed.” Terran kissed my temple. Given I’d been the first man he knew aside from his creator and brothers, my mate

knew how to kiss, and these little bits of affection he offered me... the sweetness was unlike anything I ever experienced. I loved it. "What do you think, omega mine? Do you think you want to be part of a herd?"

"I want to be a part of your life and if that means a herd, then that is exactly what I where I want to be." There was a lot to still figure out, but that much I knew without a shadow of a doubt.

# Chapter 6

Terran



It was quiet now that my brothers had gone. I'd never minded the quiet before, but right now it felt eerie and I had no explanation for why. Being here with my mate should be... not that.

Today had been a lot. Our worlds had been tipped on end—for both my mate and I. He learned of a whole world he didn't know existed and I'd learned of him. It was wonderful, but also... much.

What if I wasn't enough for him?

I worried my home was not a lot of offer my mate, who was used to the luxuries of the world. It was cozy and warm for me, a beast of simple tastes, but what of my mate?

Would he find the pallet of furs I called a bed lacking in comfort? Would he hate the mundane repetition that came with

maintaining my home? Would he miss the technology of his world? There were so many things to consider, most of which I hadn't even thought of yet.

I jumped when Maddox's hand swept across my back. I'd shifted back to my natural form after supper, not as much on purpose as much as it just happened. My mate didn't seem to mind, his hand on my back a reminder of that.

"You are worrying quite loudly, Terran. It's causing a burning in my heart," he spoke softly and close to my ear.

"I'm sorry," I said. I grasped his hand in mine and held it to my heart. The last thing I wanted to do was cause him any pain or discomfort.

His touch was a balm, the anxieties that swam through my mind settled, and the pin pricks of pain dissipated.

"That's better," he said. He pushed up on his tip-toes and planted his lips on mine.

I'd read of interactions such as this. I knew what was expected when two mates met, but I'd never experienced it. Never felt the touch of another person. Some of it came easy, like an instinct. And then there were moments like this where it caught me off guard.

I followed my mate's lead, letting him coax my mouth open and draw out my tongue with his. Perhaps as the alpha I should take charge, but my mate was a capable one, and I didn't mind following his lead. And really, the whole alpha omega role thing wasn't healthy. My mate had said as much at

dinner. Not about us, but about his world, although it would make sense that it meant us as well.

Want and desire drove me forward and I wrapped my arms around him. Where I once stood on four legs, I was now on two. I hadn't even wished it, it just came to be. My human cock was hard between us.

Maddox lifted his lips from mine and stared down at my nakedness. His eyes grew big like saucers.

"Something wrong?" I asked, suddenly self conscious of this form.

He shook his head. "I thought I imagined it before, but you're..."

"What? Tell me!" Had I somehow changed into something that wasn't human? Did my anatomy not match his? It felt like it did, but I hadn't really examined myself to see for sure.

"You're huge. I mean, alpha shifters usually are. But... You're hung... Like a horse."

I laughed. "I suppose that's fitting."

"I hope it fits."

I cupped his cheek and forced his gaze upwards. "I would never hurt you, mate. Ever. I promise you that."

"I know. I've never been much of a size queen, but I'll be honest, I can't wait to feel that inside me." His whole body shuddered underneath my touch.

I had no idea what he meant by size queen, but I forgot I even wanted to ask him to clarify after he said he wanted me inside him.

I growled. Oh, how I wanted that, too. To be connected to him in such a real way. My cock did too, somehow managing to grow even harder.

“We can make that happen. But there is some prep work that will be necessary.” My knowledge of human sexuality came from lessons many moons ago when my creators were still alive. I assumed things hadn’t changed that much over time.

Maddox moaned. “Yes, please.”

I captured his lips with mine and worked at removing his clothing while he was distracted. His pants and shirt were thrown to the ground, I didn’t care where they landed. He didn’t seem to either.

Without removing my lips from his, I guided him toward the pallet where I slept. It was a simple base, piled with comfortable furs for warmth. My mate lay down on it and looked up at me with lust in his eyes. He licked his lips as his gaze roved down my body.

“You are gorgeous, Terran. In both forms. I could look at you all day.”

“You are gorgeous as well, mate,” I said.

He tried to tug me closer to him, but I kept myself settled between his legs. “Let me get you ready for my cock. Would you like that?”



He nodded and opened wider for me. Slick seeped from his hole, and the air scented with it. I pressed a finger to his entrance, teasing around the rim. He opened for me, his slick easing the way.

“Be sure to tell me if I’m doing this wrong or if you need me to do it differently.”

“More,” he moaned. “You just need to do more.”

“We’ve only just gotten started,” I said. I leaned forward and latched onto his nipple, biting down gently on the pebbled nub. “There will be plenty of ‘more.’”

“Terran!” he cried out, his need evident in his voice, his scent, his body.

I slipped two fingers into him now, scissoring them until his hole stretched and accommodated the intrusion. Slick dripped from him. He wanted this as badly as I yearned to give it to him.

“Will you mark me, mate? Is that not what you lions do?” I asked, crossing fingers I didn’t get my shifter lore wrong.

“Yes, please. Just give me your cock.”

I chuckled. “Such a needy thing.” I wanted his mark on me. I wanted to see it in my reflection at the river, for my brothers to see it, for anyone I came across in the future to see it, but mostly I wanted to be able to run my fingers over it at any time to know that he was mine.

My cock was impossibly hard and pre-cum leaked from the tip. If I let myself play with him longer, I’d probably come just

from the noises he made. But like him, I was impatient to be inside of him.

Three fingers were inside him now and he squirmed beneath me. "I'm ready. I swear I am."

"Just a moment, kitten." I refused to hurt him and I loved that he was coming unglued under my ministrations. His cock stood erect, pre-cum dripping onto his stomach.

His hips bucked, forcing my three fingers deeper, and he cried out.

"Need you, Terran. Need you to fill me up like never before. Need you inside me, painting the inside of me with your cum. I need it more than my next breath, please."

I couldn't wait any longer either.

The hum of the song in my heart telling me Maddox was mine grew louder.

I jacked my cock, coating it in Maddox's slick. My fingers couldn't fit around the girth of me, and I worried that my mate wouldn't be able to take all of me.

"I can," he said. "I promise I can. You were made for me."

I lined up my cock to his hole and pressed inside. Pleasure, the likes of which I'd never experienced before, built within me. Inch by inch, I pressed into my mate. His legs wrapped around my waist as he pulled me deeper.

Pure bliss came over his face, and his eyes rolled in the back of his head. "So good, Terran. So fucking full."

I kissed his neck, sucking on the skin. I might not leave a bite mark like he would on me, but I could mark him.

It took a few moments, and some pauses, but eventually I was buried to the hilt. I gave him a moment to adjust, then I began moving, my hips bucking as he met me thrust for thrust.

His eyes changed first, giving in to his animal side. I knew the bite was coming and I was ready for it, I craved it.

My release was close. Tingles began at the base of my spine and pleasure shot down my limbs. I bared my neck to him and he struck. His canines descended and latched onto my neck where it met my shoulder. White hot pleasure erupted from me and I came.

“Maddox!”

His release came soon after. Cum shot between us, coating both our chests.

My cock kept going, releasing more deeper into my mate. His hips bucked and he moaned. “Fuck, oh fuck, I’m going to come again. How am I coming again?”

Maddox’s cock erupted again. It twitched as it spasmed out more spunk.

I bent my neck and licked his skin, bringing the taste of him to my tongue.

And still my cock remained hard, shooting more cum into my mate.

“You don’t have a knot, but I think this is better. I want to taste you. I want to see if I can take that cock down my throat.”

I nuzzled into my mate’s neck. “Later, mate. Rest first.”

“Can’t move. My legs have turned to jelly.”

I was sure that mine did as well, but there was aftercare that needed to be done.

Finally my cock softened and I was able to pull out of him. He groaned as I did so.

“Empty. I’m empty.”

I chuckled. “I am as well.”

“No kidding. What was that? Was that normal for you?”

I shrugged. “No idea. You are my first, mate. And my only.”

He blushed a deep scarlet. I fetched a clean rag and the wash basin. My mate lay still, with his eyes half closed while I cleaned us.

“You may be sore tomorrow, “ I said.

“Shifter healing,” he said. “It has its perks.”

Once I finished, I set the basin aside and snuggled in with my mate. It was odd how quickly I’d adjusted to another person. I’d never had anyone in my space for this long. But Maddox was different. He was mine and he belonged here.

“I’m hot,” Maddox mumbled against me. “Like fever hot.”

I pressed my hand against his forehead. Sure enough, he was sweating.

“And I need you... do... does your kind go into heat?” he asked.

“We are all alphas. Does your kind?” I asked.

“No. I don’t think so, but I’m hot and I can’t think of anything but having you inside me again, and my cock is already hard... I can only deduce this is the beginning of a heat.” He spoke much calmer than I would’ve in his position.

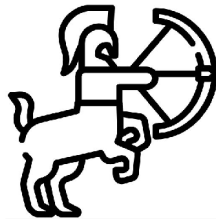
“Tell me what to do to help.”

“Make me come with your mouth, and if I need more, fuck me on my hands and knees, and if I need more, let me ride you, and if I need more, I’m sure we’ll figure it out...” He was already pulling me to him for a frenzied kiss, his calm no longer there.

We spent the next two days touching, kissing, sucking, nibbling, and fucking each other until we passed out from sheer exhaustion, only to do it all over again. And after each joining, there were a few minutes where it was just him and I, content in each other’s arms. But on the morning of the third day, the intense need was gone, and we were able to at least have breakfast before screwing each other’s brains out. And to think I’d been afraid he might be bored here.

# Chapter 7

Maddox



I stood at the basin, washing the dishes from the meal that Terran and I had just shared. He had gone out with his brothers the day before and hunted. We all ate the elk they caught.

Their hunting skills were impressive. Unlike me, they didn't use their teeth and strength. They used bows and arrows they created with their hands. Archery was an activity I equally loved and sucked at.

I'd offered numerous times to shift to my lion form and join them for a hunt. Terran insisted that he and his brothers could handle it. I understood their need to provide and that this was a brother activity, but my beast was not impressed. Maybe I needed to go out on my own, just to sate my lion.

It had been two weeks, give or take, since I wasn't actually counting the days that my heat had passed. I hadn't known that heats were real. Sure, I'd heard of them, but hearing something exists and knowing first hand that they did were two very different things.

And oh, what an experience that had been. My mate and I couldn't get enough of each other. I loved every second of it, but as it slowed, I was grateful for that as well. My body needed time to recover before the next heat came... and did I have plans for that day when it came. Or maybe before hand. Probably before hand.

My cheeks warmed just as I thought of it, both the heat and my dirty plans. I hit the switch to turn off the water and stared at it for a moment. I flipped it back on and the water ran, and then turned it off again.

“You have running water,” I said. I wasn’t sure why it suddenly hit me. I’d been living here and using it, but this was the first time I truly thought about it.

Terran turned to me from where he had been sitting by the fire. He was in his centaur form, his bow lay in his “lap”, and he was stringing it. He enjoyed being in his human form, but still spent a lot of time as a centaur. I understood that. I loved my lion, but preferred my human form.

“Yes,” he said with a grin. “You’ve been here a while and you’ve just noticed?”

“How?” I said.

“The same way we have the lights.” He indicated to the overhead light, which wasn’t like the light bulbs like I was used to. It was simply a glow that illuminated the room.

“How?” I said again.

“The water is courtesy of me. My creator gave me and my brothers magic, similar to witches, I suppose, but ours are more derived from certain things. I’m most connected to the earth, Luan is connected to the moon, and Apollo to the sun. The light is courtesy of Apollo.”

“But how do you get it here?” The entire thing made even less sense than when I originally asked him the question.



“I ask it to come.” He shrugged.

“You asked the water to come and it just came?”

He shrugged. “That’s kind of that’s how I think of it. Apollo thinks of it more as a command.”

Saying pretty please to water was one thing, but commanding it?

“So it’s like a spell?” That was as close as I could come to anything similar to this. Maybe it was like the fae with their affinities?

“Sort of. Spells are temporary and can be tricky. I simply gave the water a flow to my home and asked it to come, same as I did with my brothers’ homes.”

“And it does?” That was trippy, but I trusted my mate and I wasn’t going to think too hard about it. I was grateful for it.

The moment I started thinking about it, I began feeling unsettled again. When that happened, I always had to touch my mate in some way. We could go periods of time without having our skin touching, but for the most part we didn’t leave each other’s side. And touching him made the world melt away when this feeling arose.

Even yesterday when he had hunted, though I knew he was returning, as the hours dragged on, my skin grew tight. Then the minute he returned, he pulled me into his arms and held me tight, and all was right in my world. I wasn’t sure if this was a newly mated thing or part of where they lived, with me being a shifter and all, or possibly just the way my life was going to

be. And really? It didn't matter... not when I had Terran as my mate. He was worth all of it.

He held out his hand and I walked over and grasped it.

"Everything all right, love?" he said.

"Yes. I just can't wrap my head around it." Understatement of the year.

"Luan might be able to explain it better," he said. He was quiet for a moment. Then he looked at me, pulling both my hands into his. "If you wish to return to the human world, just say the word and we can go there. I can live as a human. We don't even have to tell anyone what I am."

My heart broke. He was instantly willing to give up who he was, just to give me comfort. Even if that was what I wanted, I'd never allow it. Who he was mattered, and living a life in disguise... that was no life at all.

I shook my head. "I love it here. I'm not ready to return. I almost don't want to. If it wasn't for my friend Kian, I think I would be perfectly happy to live here for eternity. But I have a feeling that we need to go back... There's things happening. The things your creator came up with." All the bits and pieces floating around in my head suddenly formed complete thoughts and out they came.

"The recipes. They need to be gotten rid of again," Terran said. "Luan has the same feeling that you do. Perhaps we are a connection. Something that can be used to stop those things. Perhaps it is time for us to go."

“Not yet,” I said, my voice pleading. I wasn’t ready. I’d only found him and this place, and I’d been travelling for so long. And maybe that made me selfish, but I wanted some time just for us.

“No, not yet.” Terran pulled me into his lap and kissed my neck, and then scented me as if he too was a beast of prey. “Do you feel the same that I do?” He rested a hand over my stomach.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “That we belong together because... um yeah, so very much.” I looked at him, his face filled with confusion. “That’s not what you meant.”

“No.” He kissed my cheek. “It’s not, but yes I do feel all of that too. Of course I do. You’re my mate, the one person in all my years in this earth for me to cherish and love, to be my confidant, my best friend, my lover, my companion, my everything.”

My eyes teared up at his beautiful, heartfelt words.

“You make me so happy.” I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close. We stayed like that for a while, just being in each other’s presence, soaking in each other’s warmth.

His mood shifted. Not in a bad way, but it was different enough that I pulled back to try and figure it out.

“Can you feel?” he said, his eyes boring into mine, conveying something, yet I couldn’t quite understand what.

Then I looked down at his hand, settled on my middle.

*Baby.* My lion perked up. *Baby.*

And suddenly it all made sense.

“You’re saying...?”

He nodded. “You are with child. New life grows within you.”

My eyes widened. “So soon?” I mean, I understood how the mechanics of it all worked, but also... I’d only just arrived and I was feeling myself. Or at least I was not feeling sick to my stomach and exhausted, like the pregnant omegas I’d known.

He chuckled. “What do you think your heat was, love?”

“A really great time?” But now that he said it, it made sense. Heat wasn’t just about fun naked times for the animals in the wild. It was all about breeding. It would make sense that mine would be the same.

He outright laughed. “It was that. Do you wish for children?”

I nodded. “Very much so. I always wanted to be a father, but I thought that would never be the life for me. I was selfish. I wanted my fated before venturing into the world of fatherhood and I thought for so long that it would never happen to me. That maybe my dreams were just that.” My voice cracked with emotion. “How about you?”

“I never thought it was in the cards for me to have a child. In truth, I wasn’t sure it was even a possibility. But now that I have you... this is the best news. I don’t think I could be any happier than I am at this moment.” He kissed me breathless.

“Will it be a centaur like you?” I wasn’t sure why I asked. It didn’t really matter to me as long as our baby was healthy. More out of curiosity than anything, I supposed.

“We will see. Do you wish to have a lion?”

“I wish to have your child, whatever form they take,” I said.  
“I’m so excited to be a father with you.” I wrapped my arms around him. “Thank you for being.”

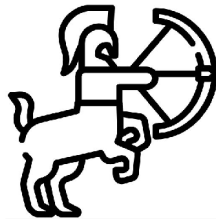
“For being what?”

“Just for being. My world is a better place with you in it.” I pressed a kiss to his neck.

My kind might not approve of his creators and what they did, but there was no part of me that wished they had done even a single thing differently. They brought me Terran.

# Chapter 8

Terran



“My mate feels that it is time,” I told both of my brothers.

I hadn't pushed him, giving him the time he needed to adjust to life here and with me. He'd been through so much to get here and while he didn't call it such, he had some sight to him. I trusted he would know when it was time, and according to him, that was now.

Apollo of course did not look any more agreeable to the idea than he had a month ago. I didn't think any passage of time would change that. He was the stubborn one of us, although I supposed if you asked him who was, he'd have said Luan or I.

Luan surprised me, though. I expected a bit more enthusiasm from him.

“Oh?” He seemed to hedge away from the idea of going public with our existence. Though it was only a matter of time before

we had to. He wasn't all in by any means, but he was open. At least that was the vibe I'd been getting from him.

"What?" I asked him.

"We need to be cautious," Luan said. "We have no way of knowing how anyone will react to our presence."

He was right. They could think us monsters. But if that were the case, we could just disappear again. At least that was what I kept telling myself.

"It sounds like they're going to find out about us if they keep digging into our creator's journals anyway," I said. Our mate knew of us. I doubted he was the only one, but I left that bit to myself. This was stressful enough as is.

"I'm not sure about that," Luan said. "Did you look through the one that Maddox brought here? It's mostly gibberish. You can only read between the lines if you really try."

"He was able to figure it all out," I reminded him.

"Because of who you are to him."

I wasn't so sure if that was the only reason, but I couldn't deny it was at least a contributing factor.

"The mere presence of my mate here tells me that it is time for us to go public."

"You would not have said that a month ago," Apollo said. "And what is so wrong with staying here? Why must we involve others?"

I sighed. “A month ago I would have said that, too. But now that I know what it’s like to have another... this existence is a lonely one. I didn’t want that for my child. No matter what form they came out in.” Centaur, lion, sphinx, I didn’t care. “Maddox has friends out there. Allies who will accept us. He and I can go. No one has to know that there are more like me.”

“You leaving this forest... we don’t know what will happen,” Luan said.

He was right. I was sure the nosy council would have a million questions for me. They would want to see where I came from. From what Maddox had told me about them, there were good people on there, but there were nefarious ones as well. Those were the ones we couldn’t trust.

My brothers and I had all gathered at Luan’s home, or at least outside of it. As far as distance went, he was only a few minutes for me. Apollo was the one of us who sheltered himself more, putting himself away into a darker corner of the forest where even I had not been.

“What if this pregnancy doesn’t go well?” I said. “Already there are growing pains. If Maddox needs the care of a doctor, then I want to have one available to him.”

“We don’t know how it’s going to go. We can’t read the future,” Apollo said. I could tell he was struggling with the decisions. His eyes softened at the mention of my child.

Luan shook his head. “No, unfortunately my magic has never allowed that.”



We had gotten tastes, glimpses sure, but never a definitive view of the future. My mate had, but it had all been about us, not the world in general. We were all basically winging it and that was scary. But scary shouldn't determine what we did or didn't do.

"I'm going to hate myself for suggesting this, but if my niece or nephew's life is on the line, then I suppose it will be worth it," Apollo began. "We don't know what will happen if we leave the forest, but what if we brought someone here? Someone who knows better the inner workings of the council and the world out there. Someone who might understand where we come from."

I hadn't thought of that. It made sense. But there were so many factors to consider before making a decision as big as that one.

"Okay, who did you have in mind?" I asked.

Apollo threw his hands in the air and shot me an incredulous look. "How the fuck would I know? I only know you two. I'm just thinking if we find the strongest, closest witch. One who won't have malicious intentions."

"That's a hell of a spell," Luan said. "It might take me a few days to perfect it, and it will likely take all of us to complete it."

"We better get to work then," I said. "Maddox will be happy to hear this."

"Happy to hear what?" Maddox came from the forest, pushing through the trees into the clearing.

“You found your way,” I said.

We had discovered that the two of us could locate each other easily enough by following our heart song. If it grew louder and less painful, then we were on the wrong track. It only dulled when we were getting closer to one another. We could soothe that ache of being away from one another by keeping our communication open.

It sucked that there was pain, but there wasn't anything we could do about that aside from not being too far apart. Thankfully, I could feel it too, so I instinctively knew if it was getting to be too much for him and could hurry back to his side. We both agreed that that touching 24/7 wasn't the best way to handle it. We both needed some time apart. Just not a lot.

“We're going to summon a witch.” Apollo didn't even pretend to lead into it, blurting it out instead.

His eyebrows shot up. “Do you know any?”

All of us shook our heads.

Maddox walked forward, linking his hand into mine. I was in my centaur form and grateful that unlike when he was in his lion form, I had a hand to give him. I loved his beast, but sometimes you need to intertwine your fingers and just soak in the comfort of your mate.

Unlike my mate, this was my natural form, the one I was currently most comfortable with. When I was alone with him, it was different. Clothes didn't quite suit me in the way that

they did him, but when we were just the two of us, he rarely wore any either.

“The spell will take time,” Apollo said. Until meeting my mate I’d never known Apollo’s voice could be so soft. He was kinder to my mate than he’d ever been to Luan or me. Not that Apollo was mean, he was just grumpy. “Do you think you and the baby will be safe?”

Maddox put a hand over his belly, already swollen with our child. “Yes, I believe that he is growing just fine in there. And I feel good. If I was worried, I’d let you all know. I promise.”

“Great. It’s important that you do. It won’t take but a few days to get the spell ready. Maybe I can specify that we need a healer as well,” Luan said.

I loved that my brothers were looking out for my mate and their future nibling. They would be the first in the next generation of our kind. It was a huge deal.

“Don’t get too picky. We want this person to actually exist,” Apollo said.

“This was your idea?” Maddox asked, looking as surprised as I had been when it was first brought up by Apollo.

My brother nodded. His cheeks pinked. “Whatever it takes to keep my niece or nephew safe.”

“Thank you,” Maddox said. “It means... thank you.”

Apollo nodded and left. Apparently he was done with the being a softy portion of the day.

“I can’t wait until he meets his mate,” I said.

I could see it now. He was going to be so sweet there would probably be cavities. He was going to dote on him in a way that made me look like I gave my mate no mind. It was going to be adorable. Not that I would tell him that. He’d deny it and go away all grumpy. It was his way.

Luan snorted. “He’d have to leave this place to find them. Or they’d have to come here.”

I didn’t bother to mention that the latter was a real possibility. It was how I got my mate, after all. Not that hanging out and hoping for your mate to wander in was a good plan.

“Have either of you tried getting in touch with your two legged forms?” Maddox asked.

Luan shook his head. “No. Being confined to the forest has cut down on our opportunities to be social, so even if we could take a human form I doubt Apollo would venture too far. We were discussing the possibility of you leaving the forest, but I don’t like the idea of you two going alone.”

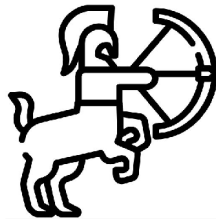
“Well, humans have these things that they trailer their horses in, and if we needed to take you guys somewhere I—”

“No,” we both said at the same time. I knew the contraptions he had in mind. When my brother told me about them, I was appalled, before remembering that they were intended for full beasts, not those such as us. The idea of transporting ourselves in some sort of trailer pulled by a vehicle... I shuddered at the mere thought.

Maddox chuckled “All right. All right. I won’t mention it again. Let’s see if we can summon some help.”

# Chapter 9

Maddox



I lay in the bed. I had worked quite a while to get the bedding of animal skins and collected feathers and other stuff into as comfortable a position as I could. And now I was afraid to move. It wasn't the bed's fault I was uncomfortable. Not really. A lot of it had to do with being pregnant. Still, there were days I longed for a big fluffy mattress and a down comforter to wrap myself in.

"I'm not going to lie, Terran. There are some modern conveniences I really do miss." I answered his unspoken question as he watched me form the perfect spot to sleep in.

He quirked an eyebrow at me, smiling as he looked down at me from where he stood. I caught him doing that a lot... watching me lovingly, almost as if he couldn't believe his luck in finding me. I knew the look, I had one just like it.

“And what is that, my love?”

He was in his centaur form now, and he laid down so that he was next to the bed with me. His tail swished and then settled on the floor of our cabin. I loved that he felt comfortable to just be with me like this, in his true form.

“A mattress.” I patted the “bed” I was laying on. “A comfy mattress with that fancy new foam that lets you sink in while being supportive.”

“A mattress, hmm? I think I know of those. Perhaps when we know more about how the outside world accepts us, we will get those for you.” He kissed my forehead. “But either way, I will make sure we have something comfortable for you to sleep on.”

I closed my eyes, envisioning sinking into a new mattress, both to sleep and to do other things that were much more fun. He’d like it too, at least when he was on two legs.

“And a bath tub.” Soaking in a hot bath sounded heavenly. I didn’t mind not having all the modern conveniences I’d been used to once upon a time. Most of them I never even gave a second thought about, but a hot soak in the tub... that I missed, and it had been so long since I had one. I wasn’t even sure how long, the days of my journey running together.

“We’ll get one of those as well. Although if you wish to soak in the water, we do have the hot springs.” His eyes sparkled.

I perked up. “Hot springs?”

“Yes, I have not taken you there? I guess I should have thought to.”

“No you didn’t, I would absolutely know if I had been to any hot springs.” A sharp pain twisted in my gut and I clutched my side. It wasn’t the first time, and I knew how to make it go away. That didn’t make it anymore comfortable.

Terran’s dark brow furrowed. “This pain happens more and more.”

“I know,” I said. I breathed through the pain until it finally subsided. “It just feels as if he’s turning in there a lot. Then he settles and the pain goes away. I don’t think it’s serious.” At least that was what I kept telling myself.

Terran wasn’t buying it, the worry lines on his face not settling any. Or maybe he saw something I didn’t. He was the first to sense our baby, after all.

“Perhaps you and I should go... it’s probably not the best to wait for Luan and his magic summoning spell... but a healer could help or at least let us know not to worry.” He brushed the hair from my brow.

It had been a week since we had talked to his brothers, and we knew that Luan was hard at work. But still, with each passing day my belly grew larger and the pain I experienced became sharper. And rushing a spell sounded like a way to assure that everything went wrong and he’d have to begin again.

“I know,” I said. “Maybe the hot springs will help them.”



He chuckled. “Anything for you, love. Come on.” He helped me to climb onto his back and then he stood.

We had taken to traveling this way a lot, and even with my growing belly and my center of gravity a bit off, it was a comfortable way to get places. It was as if we were made for each other, which made sense given that we were.

Terran enjoyed when he had his two legs, but usually only for our private times together. Any other time, he was in his centaur form. And when I rode on his back, it sated our heartsong in a way nothing else did.

I yawned and held him around the waist. I didn’t even bother paying attention to the path that he took. It wasn’t as if I was ever far away from my mate, so it was unlikely that I would need to find my way back here. I was content to just ride along with him, holding on securely to him.

We came upon a pond, or at least at first glance it was a pond. When I looked more carefully I could see the steam that rose from the water’s surface. It was quiet and calm, a slice of perfection carved out in this magical space. They didn’t call the forest magical, but it was. At least to me.

“Oh wow,” I said. “It’s beautiful.”

“Indeed. It’s one of my favorite places. Although honestly I don’t come here that often. It is not as easy to dry my coat as it is to dry human skin and until recently, I always had both.”

“Shift and come in with me?” I said, climbing down his back after kissing his shoulder blades one by one.

I'd taken to only wearing a pair of shorts everywhere we went. Soon I would need to fashion something to go over my rounded belly. I hadn't planned on needing paternity clothing when I ran off in search of... well this. I was pretty much down to no clothing left that fit, making it a really good thing that it was just the four of us and not in a place with a bunch of humans.

And really, I didn't need them here. The temperature was always perfect in the forest. Even if they still fit, I probably wouldn't wear a shirt most of the time anyway. It wasn't as if they did. If anything it would be a bit awkward for me to be the only one with a shirt.

"Being naked in the hot spring with my mate? That's an excellent idea," he said. And where my centaur once stood, my human mate was now standing. He was getting so good at his shifts. He still called them wishes, which I found completely adorable.

I grinned at him. "You are getting quicker with that."

"I am," he said. "I have to think less about it. Is that how it is for you?"

I had to think about that for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so. Not all the time. Sometimes I need to force my beast to listen. He can be a bit bossy at times."

"I think I'd like to see that side of him." He reached for my hand and helped me to climb into the warm water.

I let it wash over my skin. The temperature was warm and inviting without the bite of heat that came with man made hot tubs. It also didn't have the chemicals humans used. I instantly fell in even more in love with the place.

"Oh, this is comfortable." I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth surrounding me. "Can I just move in here?"

"It is indeed comfortable, but as for moving in? Unless you are part mer-person, it's probably not ideal. Come this way," he said, and he put his arm around my waist, guiding me through the water. "We have a bench set up. It's large enough for me to lay down on."

My mate and his brothers had thought of everything.

"Perfect." I settled on to the rock ledge and my lower back immediately loosened. The knots that had formed there over the course of my pregnancy untwisted. "Oh, this is heaven. I've died and gone to heaven. I'm never leaving."

"No, mate. This is more like paradise. You have not died." Technically he was right, but it still amused me slightly.

He settled closer to me, putting an arm over my shoulder, my head falling onto it. "Tomorrow..." he said.

"What about it?" I leaned into him.

"We will tell Luan that we will go to the human town. We will get in touch with your friend. If he has been mated, surely he has had a child and has gotten the prenatal care that he needed." He wasn't asking. If I were to guess, he'd spent the

entire walk over here thinking about it. He was such a good mate and was going to be an amazing father.

“Yeah, I suppose it is time for that. I would feel as if something was wrong wouldn’t I? You feel how content our baby is, right?” But there was pain, and as much as I tried to brush that off as being no big deal, part of me was beginning to worry that maybe it was.

There was that furrow again in my mate’s brow. He stared down at my stomach, just below the surface of the water.

“I will admit there is a certain calmness that radiates from our child. But I do not like that it causes you such pain when he moves.”

“I know,” I said. “Trust me, it’s not any fun for me either. But it only happens once, maybe twice a day. It’s not constant.”

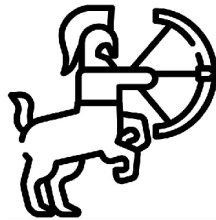
“Still, we will go.”

“All right,” I said.

Terran kissed my neck. “Thank you, mate.”

# Chapter 10

Terran



Ever since my mate had come to the forest, I slept better than ever and more often. But on this night, sleep wasn't calm. I found myself in a dream unlike any I'd ever experienced before. I was running, but I wasn't running from something. No. I was running to something or along with it.

Pure goodness and joy warmed my heart as I ran through my dream, chasing something that was just out of reach. I ran on four legs, chasing what? The creature came into view.

It was a centaur, like me, only smaller. With bright eyes and an adventurous smile.

A child! I sucked in a breath.

My child. Our baby would be a centaur. His coat was lighter like mine, but his hair colored dark like my mate's. Small antlers emerged from his head. He was beautiful.

Mid-stride, the boy shifted from his centaur form to his human, just as my mate in his lion fur came into view. The child squealed with happiness when he saw him and where stood a human boy was now a lion cub. He had shifted once more.

Three forms.

My child would have three forms. From what I knew about shifters, three forms didn't exist. But there was no doubt in my mind that this was real, that our child was going to be a wonderful blend of the two of us.

The forest in my dream was similar to the one we lived in now, only less dense, more light coming through. The protection that we had encased ourselves in for the past thousand years was gone. But we weren't scared. If I hadn't focused on it, I might not have noticed.

We were not hidden anymore. Something in my dream told me that when my child was born, we wouldn't be alone anymore. It was something I hadn't realized I'd been longing for and now that I had a glimpse of what it felt like, I yearned for it so deeply that it woke me up, pulling me from my slumber and the magical future it showed me.

My mate was already out of bed.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

He was staring down at me. "Yes, I got up to pee and you were a bit restless. Is everything all right with you?"

I nodded. “Luan needs to get to work on that spell soon. Sooner than we thought. Or maybe we should really go on our own.” We had talked about it, but then decided to hold out just a bit longer, the hot spring giving me so much relief that he hadn’t experienced pains, at least not in the frequency that he had been.

“Are you sure everything is okay?” He reached for my hand. “I promise you, I will tell you if the pains get bad again.”

I opened my arms so that my mate could settle in them. “I know you will, and yes, everything is okay. I worry sometimes that once we do this, there might be challenges, but I believe that we will be accepted.”

“Is that what you were dreaming about?”

“Sort of? Not really.” I tightened my embrace. I needed to tell him soon, but something inside me told me now wasn’t the time.

“What about the others that your creator made? Can you tell me about them? You and your brothers keep hinting about them, and I feel like I am in the dark. I know not all secrets are meant to be shared, but if... can you tell me?”

I sighed. “It’s been a long time since they were created along with us. It’s hard telling if their differences even lasted through the generations.” That was part of the reason we hadn’t shared a lot. We really didn’t have the answers. There was a protection over us that they didn’t have as far as we could tell.

“What does your gut tell you? Do you think they are still out there the way they were or do you think they are just like me now? A shifter born from the goddess, not created by people meddling with magics that weren’t theirs to use?”

“I’ve been thinking about it quite a lot lately. My gut says that they have stayed sort of the same. Our creator had tried many different things. My brothers and I were the most extravagant of their concoctions. The weapons were the most dangerous.” I hated having to bring up the past, but it was necessary in order for us to have a future. Our creators weren’t good people. This I knew. But also, without them, there wouldn’t us. The emotions surrounding the entire thing were beyond complicated.

“What she had done to other shifters, though...” I swallowed deeply. “That had been the real cruelty of her actions... my creator had captured a bobcat shifter, a young alpha. She did experiments on him, her intentions to be able to create shifters from humans so she could build her own army. She made it so that he could turn humans to shifters, but it only worked on their fated mate. That was a failed experiment to her. She wanted him to be able to change any human.”

The way she just took what she wanted, not caring about the beings she hurt along the way, would always be a stain upon my soul. It was out of that cruelty I came to be here. Nothing could erase that.

“You think that those bobcats and others like them still exist?”



I'd not heard of them, but then again, that wouldn't be something they would share. Perhaps Luan had kept tabs. "Potentially. I do know that the bobcat and his mate eventually had a child who was a shifter. So whatever change my creator made to them stuck." Which was dangerous to the bobcat in a way I was glad he never discovered.

"If the council or anyone knew that there were shifters who could turn humans or that there was a way they could recreate what she had done..." Maddox shook his head. "That information is dangerous in the wrong hands."

I disagreed. It was information that was dangerous in pretty much all hands. That was a power that should be left to the goddess. If the bobcats had survived that long without everyone knowing, then they abided by the ways of the goddess. But in other hands... I shivered at the thought of it.

"Exactly. Just as dangerous as those weapons. We need to find out who uncovered the journals, get rid of them, and destroy the journals. We could potentially track down her other creations and make sure they're safe."

"What were the others?" he asked.

"A wolf."

"A wolf? We have those."

"This one was different. Their wolf form was massive and more humanoid than anything else. It could travel on two legs."

“So like a werewolf, not just a wolf? We have movies about them, or maybe not them, but the human version.” His face twisted at the thought of whatever his imagination was conjuring up.

“I suppose that makes sense. They were strongest during the full moon.”

“That tracks.”

I pulled my mate in closer until he was laying over top my chest. We had taken to me sleeping in my human form. That way I could wrap my mate around me closer. He preferred to be draped over top of me as much as he could, our skin constantly touching.

I kissed his temple. “We will keep you and our child safe,” I said.

“I know you will. I trust you.”

Getting up so early had my mate exhausted and just after lunch he decided to curl up for a nap. He invited me to join him but when we “napped” together, napping was rarely the final result and he needed the sleep. Especially with us leaving soon.

I wandered outside so as not to disturb him, only to discover my brothers waiting there for me.

“Why didn’t you knock?”

“We didn’t want to disturb your mate.” Luan kicked the dirt with his hoof. “We sensed something today... coming from you.”

“Explain.”

“It was as if you were reaching out to us in your sleep, trying to show us something,” Apollo clarified. “And so we came.”

“Oh.” I walked closer to them. “I had a dream last night. I didn’t understand all of it, but it wasn’t just a dream... it was visions of the future... my future. I have not yet told my mate.”

“And it was so bad you called out to us?” Apollo squeezed my shoulder.

“No. It wasn’t bad at all. It was the opposite. I saw my son, the one growing inside my mate. He has three forms. In the beginning he was a centaur, like me, running free. But then later, he shifted first to human and then to a lion, like his omega father.”

“That is not the way of things.” Luan kicked up dirt behind him. “Are you sure you saw your future and it wasn’t just a dream?”

“It was the future, but there was more to it... we were in the woods, but not these woods... they weren’t protected. We were out there.” I didn’t need to explain where there was. “And it was safe and free and I didn’t want to leave when I woke up.”

“And you’re sure?” Apollo looked me square in the eyes.

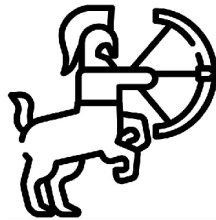
“Like sure, sure?”

“I’m beyond sure.” In a way it would be easier if I weren’t.

“Things are about to change, brothers. It’s time to prepare.”  
Luan let out a long breath. “If we aren’t too late.”

# Chapter 11

Maddox



I lay in the sun, near the hot springs, in my lion fur. My large belly protruded. If I lifted my head to try and look at my tail I likely wouldn't be able to see it. The same went true for my dick when I was in human form. More than once I teased my mate that it was gone, and being the dutiful mate he was, he made sure to show me that it was both there and working perfectly fine.

Terran's dream from the night before left me unsettled, though I couldn't tell if the emotion originated from me or my mate. Our connection—our bond was still so new, and while it felt natural and right and in some ways like it had always been there, I still didn't fully understand it. I'd sensed when he was having the dream, though I couldn't see it.

I only heard about it when he told his brothers. I'd tried to nap, but when my mate went outside, the heart song tugged,

waking me. I hadn't meant to eavesdrop. I'd just gone to the window to see how close he was and if he was returning. But then when he started to mention the dream, I froze, soaking in every word.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the dreams weren't the only things I was sensing. I was finding that more and more often now I could feel what Terran was feeling. Almost as if I could read his thoughts. It wasn't just the heart song either, although that did play a part in it.

I could tell when he worried about me and our child. Just me shifting into my lion form spiked his anxiety. I loved the way he wanted to protect our child, but hated the toll it was taking on him.

After the dream, I'd been able to soothe that by encouraging him to speak with his brothers about it. That gave him something else to focus on. And his brothers, unlike me, understood the way of their being and how their dreams might be different than ours.

Of course, once I heard the details of the dream, I felt my own anxiety rise. There was nothing wrong awaiting our child from what he said, but he'd be different. And different as a child brought its own sets of issues. But more than that, it might draw the attention of those who might seek to do us harm.

Our baby, our perfect, beautiful, innocent child would have three forms. It was chaos enough to have a baby shifter around. Wolves had it easy. Their beast didn't come out until puberty hit. Cats though, our beasts were with us from birth

and it could get hectic. So not only did I have to worry about keeping a lion cub in order, but also a centaur.

I imagined he would be adorable. Perhaps with antlers like my mate in his centaur form. I would have to ask Terran to explain it to me more. Describe to me in every detail about our child, possibly draw him for me.

At least when I focused on the happiness that Terran had spoke of in that dream, I didn't worry too much about the three forms. He was so proud of our young and his abilities.

The sun was beginning to set and the warmth of the day receded. It would be time for me to get up soon. If only the sun would stay high in the sky for a few more hours.

The three brothers weren't too far for me. My heart song was quiet. The pain that I associated with not being near my mate was tolerable, more like a annoyance than anything else. I had such a love hate relationship with my heart song.

"Is this why you wish to remain in the forest, Maddox?" Apollo's voice boomed. "You like being able to laze around all day?"

He sounded as if he were more teasing than anything, and in return I flashed him my teeth and let out a roar.

He chuckled as he waded into the hot springs. He cupped some water in his hand and splashed at me. Yeah, he was teasing me, treating me like one of his brothers. Sort of. More like a little brother, and I loved it. I never had that kind of

relationship with my own brother, nor would I have wanted it from him. But from Apollo? It was nice.

“Leave my mate alone, Apollo,” Terran said, skipping a rock on the hot spring’s surface and missing his brother by a fraction of an inch, earning him some serious side-eye.

He brought with him one of the furs that I had fashioned to be able to wrap around my hips. Though nakedness was normal for shifters and it didn’t bother me any, my mate’s brothers were still a bit uncomfortable while I was naked. It was different for them than it was for me. They didn’t live among others so by nature I was out of the norm. He laid it beside me and I shifted to my human form and put it on.

“How was the hunt?” I asked.

Luan shrugged. “Fruitful. And I believe the spell is ready. So we took care of that too.”

“So soon?” I said.

“Yeah, once we were able to get the flowers blooming to finish it, it wasn’t hard. Not as far as spells went. It was the waiting for the perfect timing that sucked,” Luan said. and then described all of the plants and roots they had to harvest along with the water from a specific spring, some insect wings which I hadn’t wanted to hear the details of, and earth from the bed of the hot spring.

From there they had to mix it under the moon for part of it and under the sun for another. It was all very calculated and for the first time I understood why the spells my brother had



attempted had gone wrong. There was no wiggle room, not from what Apollo was describing.

“I’m going to pretend I understand all of what you said, but now that you have it...what happens next? Do you drink it?” The concoction sounded vile, but then again, spells weren’t created to put on your dinner table. They had a purpose.

“No.” Luan took over the explanation and I asked him to wait a second.

The skins were itching my skin and all the talk about the hot spring was calling to me to get into it. So I did. A few seconds later, we were all in the water, and Luan was picking back up where he left off. I had no doubt in my mind that if it had been my mate wanting to climb into the water before chatting it up about something so important that they’d have at least made a fuss about it. But with me being pregnant, they seemed to understand it was not about being lazy or entitled.

“Go ahead. You didn’t drink it. What did you do?” I felt bad about interrupting the way I did, but at the time it was the only thing to do.

“Last night under the full moon, we had a small fire and stood around it. There were words we all said and then just when the moon was at its highest point, we broke the vial of liquid into it.” Luan wiggled a bit in the water. “Not as intriguing as it sounds, is it?”

“No, not that. If anything I found it super complicated, which I suppose is good. It will prevent others from picking up on the

magics too easily.” I sat on the bench. “So did it work, though?”

“That we won’t know until we do,” Apollo non-answered me like a boss.

“I think it did, though.” My mate took my hand under the water. “I felt a slight ripple when it hit the flames. Not much of one, but enough to give me hope.”

“I felt it too,” Luan said.

“I, my brothers, did not. I wish that I did because it would be the proof we are longing for, but I didn’t.”

“Because you are of the sun, brother,” Luan said. “And we were using items of the earth under the moon.”

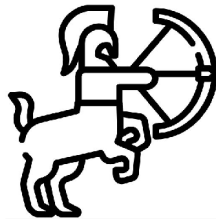
“Perhaps you are right. Only time will tell.” Apollo started towards the end of the spring and turned back to face me. “We will know when we know.” And off he went.

“Don’t pay him any mind,” Luan said. “It is difficult on us all when we aren’t all three in sync with the magics. But it is to be expected. I shall go comfort him or piss him off. Not sure which. You two stay here. Your mate could use the soak.”

We watched as he walked away, neither of us speaking. I wasn’t sure there was much to do today. We were officially in a holding pattern, waiting for the spell to do its thing so we could venture into the unknown and make a better life for our baby and for shifter kind. No pressure.

# Chapter 12

Terran



We all felt when the barrier had been breached. Even my mate, who hadn't been part of the magics. It was undeniable. I doubted even the squirrels were left unaware.

I drew my bow and Apollo his sword, and Luan even stood at the ready to fight and protect what was ours. All of us surrounded my mate to protect him and our unborn child. The thing was, unlike my brothers and I, Maddox didn't seem nervous about it. If anything he was nervous about being trapped in the center of us.

"You guys can't go in ready to fight," Maddox said. "We literally invited these people here."

"He has a point," I said, and suddenly his nerves made sense. I withdrew my arrow and slung my bow back over my shoulder. Apollo did not yet sheath his sword, but it wasn't in such a

protective stance either. “Let’s go and see if we had any luck with that spell or if we called some rando.”

Since we were traveling to the border, I stayed in my centaur form and Maddox jumped onto my back. Not so much jump jump, his belly making that not as easy as it once was, but he was there. The four of us didn’t know what to expect when we arrived, but it sure wasn’t what we found.

There were four people standing outside of a large vehicle. The large steel tube that they stood near was like a bus, but I had a feeling there was a different name for it. My mate would know, but it wasn’t the time to ask.

“See, there’s people, and they can explain to me why I felt the need to come here!” one of them said, gesturing toward us.

“People?” the other person next to him said. He had long dark hair and he bared his teeth, crouching down, ready to fight.

Apollo had his sword at the ready.

“Stop,” Maddox said, sliding from my back before I could stop him. He stood between me and my brothers and the group of people now in our forest. “You’re shifters, right? A wolf and two lions?”

“Yes,” one of them said. They narrowed their gaze at Maddox, but didn’t relax their stance.

“And you must be a witch?” Maddox asked the one who had spoken first.

“Maddox...” I pulled him closer to me. He was close to spilling our secrets. Though, oddly, enough none of our

visitors seemed to notice we weren't like them.

"You're Maddox?" the largest of them spoke and stepped forward. I wasn't going to let another alpha get that close to my mate. Maddox gripped my hand though, and held me steady.

"Yes. I'm Maddox," he said.

"I'm Armand, the Alpha-Elect of Steelwick. We're the enforcer pack that's been looking for you."

Enforcer pack. My mate had mentioned them. They were above the council, but also below them. Shifter politics confused me.

"Oh, so you're not who we summoned?" Maddox asked, not shielding his disappointment.

The lion raised a brow.

"I was summoned here," the witch spoke.

"You're a witch?" Luan asked.

"Yes, among other things. Now, can someone please explain to me why I felt compelled to come here? I left my three babies behind in care of their grandparents, and I really would like to get back to them. If there's nothing I can do here—" He didn't sound mad exactly, but he wasn't what I would call happy to be here either.

"Is no one going to say anything about the fact that we're standing in front of three centaurs? Like real ones." I didn't even notice who said that, my eyes glued to the witch.

The witch tilted his head as if looking at us for the first time. “Oh, yes. That is fascinating. I’m Franklin,” he said. “This is my mate, Wilder. Alpha of Fractured Fang. This is Armand from Steelwick and his Alpha-Mate Matthias. Did you all ask me to come here?”

“How are Kian and Cooper? And Gideon?” my mate asked. Excitement permeated through our bond until my skin tingled with it.

Armand smiled kindly at my mate. “All of them are doing well. Last we heard, Kian welcomed a child. As did Gideon and his mate.”

Maddox smiled. I felt the happiness radiating through our bond now. He missed them. I hated that being with me had kept him so isolated. It only strengthened my resolve to figure out a way to get him the life he deserved, one with freedom, something my brothers and I never truly had.

“That’s really great to hear.”

I looked to Luan and back to Apollo. Apollo finally put his sword away. Thank gods. We didn’t need blood drawn because he was being overly cautious.

Luan sighed. “We need your help.”

“I don’t know what I can do for you. I didn’t know you existed. I mean, I’ve been dreaming of centaurs for years now... I’ve told my children’s stories about them. But I guess I just didn’t know you were real.” The witch began walking in

circles around us, looking over our forms. “I probably should have.”

“They’re real and there’s more... not of them, but of others,” my mate said. “Perhaps now would be a good time to sit down and talk about it?”

“If you think that’s safe,” I said.

“We asked them to come here. Armand and Matty are with an enforcer pack that’s been helping to investigate your creator’s journals. They wouldn’t hurt us.”

“Creators? So it’s true they had found a way to create some... things?” Franklin asked.

I nodded. “It is true a witch created us. Her end goal was to build an army. We were created by the same person who created those recipes. She was hellbent on taking revenge for the way that she and her mate had been treated. Come on,” I said. “We have a place you all can stay.”

“You do?” Armand looked at me as if he wasn’t quite sure he believed me.

I nodded. “We were expecting you. I didn’t expect the steel thing behind you, though.” I indicated the bus. “I’m Terran, and these are my brothers, Apollo and Luan.”

“The three of you were created?” Franklin asked.

“Yes,” Apollo replied.

“I need to sit down. This is a lot.” Franklin looked more mesmerized than freaked out.

“Indeed,” Luan agreed. “We can take you somewhere.”

“And you are his mate, I presume? Based on his mark,” Armand noted. He eyed Maddox and I closely.

Maddox squeezed my hand. “Yes. He’s what drew me here... not in the way we called you, obviously. But I could sense him... I dreamed of him. It’s why I left the way I had. The pull was too strong.”

“And you’re with child?” Armand pointed out the very obvious belly he was now sporting.

Maddox nodded.

“Oh, this is going to be a lot of paperwork.” Armand rubbed his head. “The council is going to flip their shit. Although I’m sure they’ll get a hard on at the idea of regulating another type of shifter, but holy fuck, this is a lot to take in.”

None of that sounded good. Not a single bit of it.

“Wait. Can you shift?” Franklin asked. He looked between my mate and I as if calculating trying to figure out how we made a child. My mate’s face blushed so hard.

“Yes, I can take a human form. It only happened after I met my mate though. My brothers can’t.”

“Oh,” he said. “I was—”

His mate slapped him on the shoulder. “We know what you were trying to figure out.”

And now my mate looked like he wanted to hide away. It was adorable. And maybe I only thought so because I felt the hint



of pride that accompanied it.

“Don’t act like you weren’t thinking it.” Franklin rolled his eyes.

Apollo scoffed. “Come, there’s much to discuss.”

“We might be able to assist with accommodations if you’re going to stay the night here,” I offered. They wouldn’t be the type they were used to, but also they could sleep in their animal forms if they preferred.

“We can sleep in the RV. It’s why we brought it. We borrowed it from a pack mate. I don’t know how we can get it any closer to where you all are.”

RV. That was the name of it. Not a bus, but a sort of house on wheels. Fascinating.

“That should be easy enough,” I said and waved my hand, requesting that the forest provide us with a path that would fit the human vehicle.

The forest parted for me, trees re-rooting and moving out of the way so a path was created.

“Holy shit. You do magic?” Matty said.

“Sort of,” Maddox said. “It’s hard to understand. Just roll with it. I find it much easier that way.”

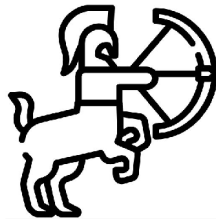
“There’s a lot I’m going to have to roll with. I have so many questions.” Franklin took his mate’s hand and all of us, including Armand, who was now behind the wheel of the RV, followed us back to my dwelling.

Franklin might have a lot of questions, but we did as well. It was going to be a long night, one a long time coming. but maybe, just maybe, when the morning came, we'd all have the answers we'd been seeking.

One could hope.

# Chapter 13

Maddox



Armand pulled the RV into a cleared out spot next to me and Terran's home. It was a nice machine, but we didn't have the hook ups I was sure they were hoping for. It was better than the ground, so at least there was that.

We set up a table with the few chairs we had outside so there would be enough room for everyone. It made me smile as I looked at the three chairs, knowing that they were made so I could feel comfortable in Apollo's and Luan's houses. It was little gestures like that that made me feel so warm and welcome here.

"We have enough food and water to last us a few days. After that we can rough it a bit more," Wilder said.

"If you need additional water or food, I can ask for it," Terran said.

Franklin raised a brow at that. “Ask who?”

“It is our way of doing magic. According to my mate, it’s different from the way that you do magic.” He looked to me as if to verify. “The spell to call you here... it was more like what you do.”

“I find all of this so fascinating.” Franklin didn’t even pretend to try to hide his intrigue in all of this. “I just have so many questions, but they will all come in due time. What was it that we were brought here for?”

I reached over and squeezed Terran’s hand. “As you noticed when you arrived, we’re going to have a child.”

“Yes. Congratulations. I’m incredibly happy to find that you are safe and happy. We know that Kian has been very worried for you,” Franklin said. His mate Wilder nodded along as he spoke. The two sat close together at the makeshift picnic table.

I hated that I hadn’t been able to put Kian’s mind at ease. I understood too well what it was like to be worried about a friend. I’d felt the same about him for so long. Regret and shame filled me.

“I know, and I am sorry that I had to leave the way I did, but the forest called to me. I couldn’t have stayed behind even if I wanted to.”

“It called to you?” Franklin asked.

I nodded. “Ever since I was a kid, I’d been drawn to the journals that were in my father’s study. I didn’t care about the recipes or any of that nonsense. The only one I cared about

had information about the beasts. The creatures. I didn't even know what they were. I just knew that they were important. So when my brother started messing around with the journals... it's like the vision of what the creatures were plagued me. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. All I could think about was finding this place."

"And you are the creatures?" Franklin asked a much more loaded question than he realized.

Terran, Apollo, and Luan nodded. "Our creator was the witch who created those recipes. The council, the leadership at the time, along with us, decided that the best way to keep all shifters safe would be to hide those creations of hers, even us."

"She was hell bent on revenge," Armand said. "You guys don't seem vengeful."

"Not at all," Terran said. "We have no problem with shifters. We sort of are shifters. Her creations didn't always pan out the way that she wanted. I would say only her recipes were successful, but even those took time for her to perfect. Us? We did not come upon this earth with any plans to wreak havoc. We simply want to live our lives."

"And you're immortal?"

"We were. We think," Terran said. "Time passed differently for us. But as soon as Maddox arrived, our timeline matched yours, and it hasn't been that much time since then. So I don't know if we're aging, but I have to assume that eventually we will grow old."

“Okay. This is a lot. Do you want to let the council know that you exist?” Franklin asked.

“Yes,” Terran said firmly. I wish I had his confidence that it was the best idea, but he and his brothers decided and it was their lives. “But before you do, there’s a piece to the puzzle you may all be missing. I’m sure you want to get to the bottom of who is behind the recipes again. The original journal, the one that held the key that unlocked all the others, was put within the council’s care all those years ago. If it got out, then someone who had access to it had to get to it.”

Franklin and Wilder exchanged a look. Armand tensed. The enforcer pack was there to keep the council at bay, but that wasn’t the same as hearing the news I’d just shared.

“We have our suspicions that there are certain members of the council who don’t like the current status quo. An eagle shifter named Ferdy had it out for a lot of us a while ago. His replacement hasn’t been any more inclined to play nice. Not to mention many of Ferdy’s assistants are still working for the council. It wouldn’t surprise me if there is rot from within.” Armand’s fist clenched.

“The other reason we called you all here is that my mate has pains. Not often, but enough that we are worried.” Terran took my hand. “I know in the big picture that is not a priority, but in my picture it is the only priority.” He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it.

“Understood.” Franklin switched right into doctor mode. “It’s a good thing I brought everything I need. Let me grab my bag.

We can get an ultrasound, or my version of one, anyway.”

“You should also know that Terran had a dream,” I began, and I looked to Luan, Terran, and Apollo to make sure I had permission to say what I was going to say. They each nodded. “He dreamed that our child could take the form of a centaur like him and then a human, but then also a lion cub.”

Armand raised a brow. “Three forms? Wow.” He chuckled. “A lion cub is rowdy enough. You are in for a handful. Congratulations.”

I relaxed. His reaction was similar to mine. Not worry or panic over the big picture stuff, just an understanding of what my life was going to look like very shortly.

“You don’t think the council will worry about that?” my mate asked

“The council does not have as much power as you think. The power lies within the packs, the prides, the leaps. Those will be accepting of you in whatever form you take as long as your intentions are pure. Now, not having a human form until you’re mated make things a little more difficult as far as interacting in the world, but we can work with that. Humans have a way to transport horses—”

“No,” I said. “They vetoed that idea already.”

“We will not be hauled around like cattle,” Apollo said.

“Of course.” Franklin came back with his notepad at the ready and a few other things. “You have a home where we can have more privacy?” He looked at me, making it clear that this was

about my baby and not any of the political mess that we'd been talking about.

"Yes," I stood up and waddled towards our door.

Terran shifted and did the same.

"This is our home." I stood inside watching as Franklin took it all in. Some things were higher and others lower than a human home. And then there was the lack of modern conveniences.

"Very nice." He went over to the counter and set two vials down that he removed from his pocket.

"Why don't you lay down and get comfortable and I'll go grab a chair. It will be easier for me with one."

I laid on the bed, my mate taking a seat beside me. Franklin came in a minute later with a chair. He handed me a vial and asked me to drink it before downing one himself. It didn't make sense to me that he was taking medicine to do a physical, but what did I know. I had a healer in my pride once upon a time, but never a witch healer.

"Now this is going to be weird, so probably best if you both lay back together and close your eyes. This is my first time doing it this way." He wasn't instilling confidence. "Not exactly this way, but... it won't hurt. In fact I won't even touch you."

A calm started to ease into me and I wasn't sure if it was the tincture I drank or something Franklin was doing, but I trusted him. "Mate."



Terran laid down beside me and we closed our eyes, our hands joined.

The sound of paper flipping and a pencil rubbing against it quickly filled the air. I wanted to look, but wasn't sure if he suggested I not to ease my mind or if it would break the spell, so I closed them tighter as he did his thing, not even moving when the pain ran through me.

I wasn't sure how long he kept going, but seconds after the sound of his pencil against the paper ended, he told me to open my eyes. After a few blinks, I could see a drawing of a centaur curled up. It made no sense.

“I figured out why you have pain.”

“And?”

“Your little one has a habit of shifting in utero.” He flipped his notepad. “This was your baby when I started—think of it as magical ultrasound.” He flipped the paper again. “And this was your baby when the pain ran through you. I was surprised you didn't call out or look or something.”

“I wasn't sure if I could move,” I admitted, setting my hands on my belly. “So what should I do? Our baby shifts already? I've never heard of such a thing.”

“Just keep doing what you are doing. He'll stop once there's no more room. I think. I've never heard of this before either.”

“He's healthy?” Terran asked.

“Perfectly.” Franklin handed us the papers. “Congratulations, dads.”

I stared at the two pictures of our baby. “We’re having a baby.”

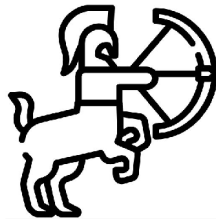
“Yes, omega mine. We are.” He kissed my cheek. “I’m the luckiest alpha on this planet.”

“I guess that makes me the luckiest omega.”

“I guess it does.”

# Chapter 14

Terran



It was great having some people here. I knew my mate enjoyed it quite a lot. But I needed to be away from it all, to just be with my mate. By human standards, it was probably considered rude to try and run away with your omega while there were others here to offer assistance. I didn't care. I needed it, if not today, soon.

“Morning, love.” I kissed his forehead. “You said to wake you.” Another thing I hated to do. I was a firm believer that if your body told you to sleep, you should sleep. But my mate insisted, and I wasn't able to deny him anything.

“Yeah.” He stretched his arms and yawned. “I want to go to the hot springs today.”

He pushed himself to sit up.

“I was just thinking I could use some Maddox time away from all of this.” I swirled my arms in an attempt to show him I meant everything but us.

“Yes! I had been wanting to have people here and now that they are... I need some down time.” He climbed out of bed. “Let me get ready and we can make a day of it.”

It wasn't fifteen minutes later he was climbing on my back and we were headed out for the day. In his backpack was a lunch and a blanket and towel. It was all we'd need. I only told Apollo where we were going and asked him to tell the others we'd be back for dinner. He was even more of a softy than I was with Maddox, and I knew he'd follow through.

“I love this.” Maddox scented my back as he held onto me. His arms didn't quite reach around the way they used to, his belly growing by the day. It was sexy as could be, but also had me trotting slower so as to not have him lose his balance. “Just you and me and our forest.”

It wasn't the first time he called it that. There were times I worried this wasn't the place for him, that he needed to be with a pack. And then things like today happened where he too wanted to hide from the world and just be one with our land.

“I love it, too.” I reached behind myself and meant to touch his arm, accidentally sticking my finger in his ear instead. “Sorry.”

“If you're going to be sticking anything anywhere... next time, ask first. I have ideas.” His rich laughter filled my ears.

“Oh yeah. Idea or ideas?”

“Ideas. Number one: you can fill my slick hole with your cock. Number two: same thing but with your tongue. Number three: you could stick your cock in my... who are we kidding, it wouldn't fit in my mouth but I'd give it a good old try and I'm sure you would like it.”

It was official, he was trying to kill me.

“Or I suppose we could turn things around. Number four: I could stick my cock in your mouth. Number five: I could fill you with my hardness.”

I let out a groan.

“See, I told you I had ideas.”

“Ideas on how to kill me.” Apparently, increased libido was one of the symptoms of a second trimester and my mate was feeling the effects. We reached the hot springs and I knelt down to let him off my back.

He came around and kissed my cheek before bringing his mouth to my ear. “If you die I can't tell you number six.” He dropped the backpack to the ground and disrobed. As he turned to go into the hot springs, I gripped his wrist and pulled him back to me, capturing his lips with mine.

He moaned against my mouth and where I once stood on four legs, I now stood on two.

Maddox threw his arms around my neck and jumped. His legs wound around my waist and I held him. It wasn't as easy as it

once was. His round belly was between us. But he felt right in my arms, like I never wanted him to leave.

“Keep this up and we’re not making into the water,” I said.

He grinned. “That’s okay.”

I asked the earth to provide us a comfortable space to lay, and the ground around us flattened, then clover grew us a soft bed to land on. I lay down, keeping my mate in my arms as I dropped to the ground.

We were naked and alone, and all our concerns were being shelved until tomorrow. In that moment, it was just me and my mate.

I kissed him deeply and it didn’t take much for his body to welcome me in. My thick cock filled his entrance. Maddox threw his head back and let out a long moan.

“Fuck, I hope I never get over this feeling. Love you so much, Terran. You fill me so good.”

My hips bucked and my mate rocked with the movement. “I love you, mate. You’re so fucking perfect.” I gripped his hips so I could feel his movements. His skin was like silk beneath my fingertips.

Slowly his hips rocked, until my cock was buried so deep within him I couldn’t tell where his pleasure began and mine ended. We were one. In rhythm with one another. Our bond was pure and unbreakable.

“Faster,” I commanded and my mate picked up the pace.

“Fuck me, Terran. Make me yours.”

I complied, bucking my hips into my mate as he rode me. Our shouts of pleasure filled the forest. Around us the clover blossomed and grew.

“I’m coming,” I shouted.

Before I could finish, my mate spilled his seed over my chest. His release spurred me on and soon I was burying my cock as deep in him as I could and coming.

Maddox rode the aftershocks, as we’d begun to call them, when my cock would release more and more cum into his body. He moaned out his pleasure each time until he collapsed on top of me.

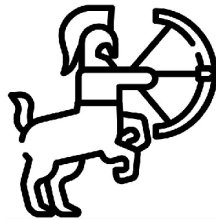
He kissed my neck. “Thank you, mate.”

“Anytime,” I said.

After a moment, I lifted him up and carried him into the hot springs. He dozed in my arms as we soaked in the warmth.

# Chapter 15

Maddox



I shuffled my feet and rolled my hands together, fidgeting. I didn't need to be nervous and yet I was. Kian was my friend. He'd understand why I did what I did. Probably. Maybe. I hoped.

"Everything's going to be just fine," Terran said as he rubbed my back. He stood behind me and was practically holding me up so that I didn't tip over from excitement and nerves all rolled into one.

"I know," I said. "It's just, I haven't seen him in a long time and I feel like I abandoned him when he needed me most. And I'm pregnant, so my emotions are all over the place."

"He understands. You have spoken to him on the phone," he reminded me and it was true. But also... it wasn't the same thing.



Kian and his mate Cooper, along with their child, would be arriving any moment now. Wilder, Franklin, Armand, and Matty were still here. They were talking over logistics with Luan about how to approach the council. They wanted to be prepared with any questions that council might have and what the future would look like going forward.

There were more people in this forest than ever before and part of me worried we were going to upset the trees. And maybe that wasn't a real thing, but it felt real and adding hormones into the mix... yeah, my head was a fun place.

I was more than content to stay here in the forest. Just maybe with a few modern conveniences. Starting with electricity and the internet. Cell phone service would be nice also. But also, it was nice to be around other people.

A truck came into view and I sucked in a breath. We had created a path from the nearest highway. It was hidden from anyone who wasn't welcome if the spell were to be trusted. It was designed to bring Kian here, and from all appearances it worked.

They parked, turned the vehicle off, and then got out.

Kian raced toward me. I couldn't believe how much my friend had changed. Both of us had changed.

He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. "Maddox! I've missed you."

"Me, too," I said, tears coming to my eyes. "I'm so sorry."

He let go of me. “For what? Following what your heart wanted? Finding happiness? You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I could have told you I was leaving.”

He grinned. “I would have told you you were crazy.”

I laughed. “You might have been right. This is my mate, Terran.”

Terran came forward, bowing his head. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Kian’s eyes widened as he looked at him. Cooper came forward, and he held their child in his arms. I had never actually seen the man up close except for when he had been brought in by my brother. Thankfully he had healed. I shivered at the thought of all that had been done to him.

I opened my mouth, ready to apologize for the things that my brother had done. He had been so cruel to Cooper. So cruel to so many. Not for the first time I wished that I’d done things differently, that I’d have been strong enough, brave enough to end my brother’s reign of horror.

“Don’t,” Kian said. “That’s another thing you don’t have to be sorry for. Your brother was not anything you could’ve done anything about. Nothing. He had all the power. We were all lucky to get out of their with our lives.”

Sometimes I thought he could see right through me. This was one of those times.

Cooper held out a hand and shook Terran’s. “Holy heck,” he said. “I never would’ve believed... I think I would have

believed the existence of a griffin before I would a centaur.” He looked over my mate, awe and fascination in his eyes. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to gawk.”

I felt a little bit odd at having my mate inspected in this way. Cooper was a historian by trade, so naturally he was curious. And meant no harm by it.

“I need to know everything,” Cooper said.

Terran laughed. “We’ll have to get you talking to my brother Luan. He is the one who likes to talk about all that we’ve done here and how we came to be.”

Their son Harrison turned in Cooper’s arms, and the next thing I knew there was a cub in his arms.

“This is your future,” he chuckled. “One minute your child is all human and napping and the next... a cub wanting to run around.”

He set his son on the ground. “Please don’t attack people’s feet, Harrison.”

Two seconds later he pounced on one of mine, and we all laughed.

“Cubs shift rather young,” Terran noted. “But they seem to know their way around in their fur.”

“In many ways, he’s more comfortable in his fur.” Kian scooped him up. “And much harder to keep track of.”

“That I can imagine. May I?” I held my arms out and he placed his son in my arms.

“I’m going to show Cooper the way so you two can chat a bit. I won’t be but a heart song away.” He kissed my cheek and the two of them began walking away together, as if they were old friends.

The plan was to take Cooper and Kian back to Terran’s and my home. It was mind boggling what could be accomplished in such a short amount of time. Knowing that we had visitors and also knowing that we would be having a child in the future, Terran and his brothers had set to work on building an addition onto our home. I had been amazed at how quickly they could work when time was of the essence. A lot of the materials they already had ready; it didn’t take them but a day or two and they had an additional room attached just next to the main bedroom.

Now we were ready for guests. And in a short time it would be our child’s room.

“This is amazing,” Kian said, looping his arm into mine. We followed behind Terran and Cooper. “So you’re mated and you’re going to have a baby.”

“Yes,” I said. “A centaur and a lion cub.”

“Twins?” he asked, his eyes wide.

I shook my head. “No. Terran had a dream and we believe that our child is going to have three forms.”

Harrison wiggled in my arms and I let him down. He bolted straight to his alpha father. It was one of the most adorable things I’d ever seen.

I placed my hands on my middle. One day soon I was going to have a little cub too. And a centaur. Sometimes I feared I was going to wake up and all of this was going to be a dream.

“Three forms? No shit? That’s... wow. So, a centaur. Half man half horse. Is he...?”

I cocked my head to the side as I looked at Kian. He never finished his sentence. “Hung like a horse?” I finished for him. I slapped at his shoulder playfully and laughed.

Terran and Cooper looked at the two of us, clearly having heard what Kian had started to say. I let them walk a few paces ahead before I replied.

“Yes, but he doesn’t have a knot.”

At first that saddened me, not because I wanted more of him. Goddess, there wasn’t any room, but because knots had always been seen as the sign of a true mate. But Terran wasn’t a shifter. Of course the physical sign wouldn’t be the same. He grew two legs for me. That kind of trumped knots. At least in my book.

“No knot?” Kian frowned as if he was disappointed for me.

“Trust me, it’s for the best. If that thing expanded any more it would rip me in two.”

Kian laughed out loud and wrapped me into a hug. “Oh, Maddox. I’ve missed you. I’m so happy that you’re here and that you’re happy. I think this is the happiest I’ve ever seen you.”

“It is. I didn’t even know it was possible to be this happy,” I said. “I’m... I think I’ve accepted that we did everything we could for our pride. Sometimes the guilt returns, but... I know here,” I tapped my chest above my heart, “that we did all we could. You more than me, but I’m ready to move on with my life. Starting here, with my family.”

“We did our best, Maddox. Both of us. You are not responsible for your brother’s actions. It is time for you to have your own life now. Harrison is very excited to have some cousins. And I’m sure the two of them will get along just fine.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve always been the best friend I could ever ask for.”

“Thank you for keeping me safe and keeping me sane when Cooper was being held captive.”

“Well, we’re out of there now. That’s what matters. Now tell me about this council business. How are we going to let them know that centaurs exist and they’re here to stay?”

# Chapter 16

Maddox



“Okay, now that I’ve been here, this place is amazing, clearly. And honestly, I’m surprised at how modern it feels considering they’ve literally built everything with their bare hands.” Kian was holding Harrison, now in his human form, on his hip as the two of us explored more of the forest. It was their second day with us, and we’d stayed up way too late talking and catching up.

I’d fallen in love with the whole forest and wanted to share it with my best friend. It wasn’t exactly the same as when I first came here, the spells making it different. The heart of the area still beat, the essence still flowing through everything. It was a bit of the goddess’s home on earth

I wanted to show him everything, but first some of the views that I had begun to enjoy recently. At first I couldn’t bear to be away from my mate enough to just bask in their beauty. But

now that we were fully mated and I'd gotten used to my heart song I'd been able to experience the wonder of it all in a new way.

My mate was still with Cooper and Luan, talking about basically the past thousand years of history. If it weren't for things like eating and sleeping, Cooper would probably be there for a week straight and not get bored.

I didn't want to listen to it all. I wasn't like Cooper. I didn't need or even want all the details. I was good with the big picture. Even if my mate and I wandered too far, that nagging, painful feeling from being separated would be more tolerable than listening to that interview process.

Cooper took his job seriously and wanted every detail. I was half expecting him to ask for the first time they stubbed their hooves or when they first tried a new herb. It was that mundane.

"It's insane, right?" I said. "I didn't even realize it at first, but they have running water and electricity. Their versions of it at least. It's doesn't seem possible and yet there it is."

"And all that's from their magic?"

"The water and lights are, yes, but there's other things that they've managed to engineer themselves. They have a forge for instance, where they have built their weapons and cutlery and whatnot. And they've obviously built their homes on their own with their own tools, and they grow their own food."



“Which is amazing, by the way. Very flavorful. I was honestly expecting bland.”

“Me too. It does get a little repetitive. But what do you do?”

“Have you introduced them to pizza?”

I laughed because the thought had crossed my mind. “No, but honestly, it wouldn’t be that hard.”

“Right. Whip up some dough, mash up some tomatoes.”

We both laughed. We had lived together a long time and our cooking skills left a bit to be desired. It was passable. But that didn’t mean we didn’t enjoy takeout or frozen dinners. And pizza was my favorite of them all.

“What do you miss foodwise?” Kian asked.

“Pizza... obviously. But also those cream filled cookies. You know, that come in like those huge packs? You can just eat all of them in one sitting. Those are the best. And peanut butter.”

“Peanut butter? You guys aren’t growing nuts out here?”

I shook my head. “They aren’t nuts really, but no, but maybe someday. We do have a berry patch and I’ve made up a few desserts with that.”

Kian grinned widely at his child, who was snuggling in close.

“Yes, little one here enjoyed plenty of berries this morning. Your mate was feeding him by the handful.”

“Well, fruit is good for him.” And it wasn’t like anyone looking into his sweet little eyes could deny him anything.

“Yes, but not good for laundry day.”

I chuckled. “Being a father looks really good on you, Kian.”

“Thank you. It’s going to look good on you as well.”

I squeezed his hand, then kept walking. “We’re near the edge of the forest. Now that the barrier is down you really can’t feel it, but I recognize where we are. If I looked at a map, I could tell you better, but I’m pretty sure the highway is not too far from here.”

“That makes sense. When we were traveling here, Cooper was doing all of the navigating. I was just too excited to see you. It’s crazy that this place has been here for forever.”

“I know, right? Although I’m not sure *this* place has. My mate says sometimes it changes. I’m pretty sure Cooper will be able to fill you in on that.”

“And the first time one of the centaurs sneezed, and the time a mosquito landed on a flower in their sight,” he teased.

“It’s not that bad.”

His eyes said otherwise.

“Fine, it probably is. But he has a passion. So that’s cool.”

A scent tickled my nostrils, but I didn’t have time to react before I was grabbed. A hand shot out from the brush and gripped my wrist hard. My arm was yanked behind my back and twisted until I had no choice but to submit. I cried out in pain.

How had I not sensed them, scented them, heard them in time? I was a freaking lion shifter. This shouldn’t be possible and yet

there I was, being held against my will by I didn't even know who. They were too fast, too precise, and they made sure of it.

“Maddox!” Kian screamed.

There was the unmistakable click of a gun. I wasn't overly familiar with the weapons considering that they were not regularly used by shifters, but I had watched enough movies. Guns equaled death. They were dishonorable under the best of circumstances. We had fangs and claws for a reason and opting to use human weapons—that was the lowest form of challenge there was.

“Who are you and what do you want?” I asked. I couldn't see my attacker as much as I tried, and with my baby growing inside of me, I didn't dare risk trying to get out of their hold—not with a gun so close by, poised to be used.

“Don't worry about it. Where are the beasts? Take me to them.”

“No.” I cried out again as my attacker twisted my arm more. I still hadn't seen my attacker's face, but the unmistakable scent of hyena filled my nostrils. Of course it was the fucking hyenas. I should've known. They had been sniffing around from the moment my brother became aware of what was in those volumes.

“If I take you, he will come to me.” The vile creature nearly cackled as he spoke. This was more to him than an end to a means. He was enjoying it.

“You won’t get away with this,” Kian said. I wanted to tell him to run, to get away from this all, to protect Harrison. I didn’t need to. That apparently was part of their diabolical plan also.

“Spare me the B movie script. You take your little child.” Kian held Harrison closer, shielding him from the hyenas’ aim. “Go back to that beast and your mate. Tell them that we can do an even swap. The beast for his mate. If he doesn’t cooperate within a reasonable amount of time, then his mate will suffer. But not before I cut this baby right out of his belly.”

The evil in his voice left no room for second guessing whether he meant it or not. He did. I struggled, kicking and screaming until I was yanked back roughly, a knife pressed to my neck. The bite of the dagger against my skin had me stilling. Then a trickle of blood ran down my neck. I stopped struggling.

“That’s better, little kitty. Play nice and you’ll be treated nice. Play rough and you’re going to be treated rough. I prefer rough.”

“Go,” I said to Kian. “Get to safety and tell my mate.” I hated to ask him to do that, to put my mate in danger. But also... our baby was in danger too, and if there were any chance Terran could save us, I had to take it.

“I can’t leave you,” Kian said.

“Go,” I said. “Run. It’s not just me. Think of your young.”

That did it. Kian sucked in a breath, then turned and ran.

“That’s better,” my attacker said. “Now you have to know that we’re not going to play nice right? The minute your mate is within capturing distance, we have plans to apprehend him.”

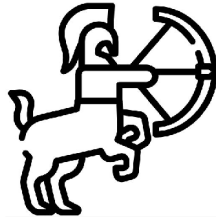
“Yeah. And who is this we?” I said. What did he think I thought a swap was? Either he was a disorganized mess or simply following orders. I could work with either. At least I hoped I could.

The hyena cackled. “Yes, you’re wanting to get plenty of information out of me, in case you’re able to get free so you can what, go to the council with that information? I’ll tell you a little secret, lion. The council was who sent me.”

Fuck.

# Chapter 17

Terran



The interview started off rather interesting. Cooper was all in on his job. You could tell he lived and breathed the histories of shifter kind. It wasn't my cup of tea, but the world would be a boring place if we all loved the same things.

But then I started to get distracted. My heart song had taken a bit to get used to. At first not touching my mate had been a bit too much to handle, but as time passed, our bond grew stronger and that lessened the struggles of not being together. But today it was different. Maybe he was traveling further than normal or it was possible it had to do with the buckets of people in our territory, but I was ill at ease, bordering on pain filled.

“And you'd say that marked the beginning of the first time the forest changed, Terran?” Cooper didn't even pretend to look up from the book he was writing in. The worst part was that I had no idea what we'd been talking about right before this. I'd been too distracted.

“I'm not sure. Can you be more specific?”

Copper looked up at me. “I remember it being like that with Kian, after I first got to him... you know after...” His story was a dark one, at least at that juncture, and I didn't blame him for not wanting to discuss it in details. I knew I wouldn't want to. “But that beginning I couldn't bare to be apart from him either.”

“It’s not easy.” I wasn’t wanting to discuss all the details, not while I was in the middle of feeling his loss. Soon enough he’d ask specifically about it at the rate he was going. The man left no historical stones unturned. Not a single one.

Then the pain changed. It wasn’t just us being apart any more. It was deeper than that, and I felt the fear and anguish build. It started even before Kian came into view, but once he did, I understood that I was dealing with far more than just distance between us.

It began with a twinge, then it was the growing unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach. The pinch to my neck was the final straw for me. Then the pain grew to an almost unbearable level. My mate was in danger and in pain, pain like I’d never felt before.

I let out a long scream. Everyone turned to look at me as if I had lost my mind. And I had, but with worry.

“Something’s wrong,” I said, biting out the words. “Something’s really wrong. I can feel it through my heart song.”

Then Kian came running, clutching his child in his arms. “It’s Maddox! He’s been taken. They have guns.”

The roar I let out rivaled that of my lion mate, instead of something that would originate from a human mouth. My mate was not only in danger, he faced a weapon his beast could not conquer. Only the weak resorted to such things. Weak and dangerous... very, very dangerous.



“Tell us everything,” I said, wanting to rush to my mate’s side, but understanding that in doing so I would risk his safety more than if I took the couple of minutes now.

My brothers were both standing at my side, ready to fight this with me. Their irritation and fear rolled off them in waves and it fed my own. They would protect my mate to the death, just as I would. He was family.

“We were walking. He wanted to show me something near the border. We were talking about how that part of the forest was probably close to the highway and then this person was there. A hyena, I think—his scent was... yeah, hyena. He had a gun and then he had a knife, and I’m not even sure if that was all. He told me that they would exchange Maddox for you. I don’t think he knows exactly what you are, he just kept calling you the beast.”

“Did he mention either of us?” Luan asked.

Kian shook his head. It didn’t mean they didn’t know about my brothers, but it left room for the element of surprise.

“How would they find us? We haven’t even contacted anyone yet,” Apollo said.

“We aren’t the only people who have access to the journals,” Armand said. “Anything in our evidence for our investigation can be accessed by the council. They might not know exactly what you are, but there’s been enough talk about the possibility, and before Maddox left he had told a few people in his interviews that he believed there were beasts out there. Simple powers of deduction would lead us here, especially if

they knew that I am here and then Kian and Cooper coming. They need only follow us.”

Fuck. We’d inadvertently had our friends lead them right to us. We’d been careful for so long. This one mistake could cost me everything... cost us everything.

“Goddamnit,” I shouted. The pain thrumming through my body had me on my knees. “It’s getting worse.”

“We will find him and get him back for you. That I can promise you,” Armand said.

I glared up at him. “You can’t promise anything, lion. Even I know that is too much. But I can promise that whoever has taken my mate will pay dearly for it. I will burn down your world in order to find him.”

I meant every word of it. I’d waited lifetimes to find him. I refused to lose him now, and I refused to pass this off to the enforcer pack. They meant well and would try their hardest. Of this I had no doubt. But they couldn’t protect my mate the way I could.

“Oh shit,” Luan said with a gasp.

I followed his gaze and looked down at my feet. My emotions had taken over, and pain and sorrow radiated from my every pore.

“The forest,” Apollo said.

All around me leaves begin to curl and wilt as if their very sustenance was being taken from them. Where my hooves lay on the ground, scorch marks remained. They weren’t just

harming my mate. They were destroying our home. Or... fuck, that wasn't them. That was me. I did this in my anger.

"You don't get a handle on things, you're going to burn down our world," Apollo said.

"You can find him," Kian said. His poor child was gripping on to him for dear life. I probably was terrifying the little cub with my behavior, and he'd already witnessed far too much for anyone, much less a cub as young as he was.

"I know we will," I said. "And I will be more careful." What was the point in helping my mate if I destroyed his home in the process?

"No, I mean, you can do it. You can find him with that heart thingie."

"How?" Cooper asked, pulling his mate closer.

"Maddox was telling me that the two of you always know where the other is. Almost as if you can read your minds. When you're not touching, you feel it right? A pain-like sensation. Even now you look as if you're in incredible pain."

Because I was.

"The hurt is strong," I said "And it's getting worse by the minute." My brow began to sweat and my muscles ached with holding them so tight, trying to stave off the pain that radiated through me.

"The pain will lessen, though, if you get closer to him. It can lead you to him," Luan reminded me.

“That feels like we’re going to be flying blind,” Apollo said, always the strategist.

“Maybe a little bit, but if we get to a vehicle, we can.”

Both my brothers began arguing, wanting to go with us.

“I don’t think we have time to find a way in which the two of you can safely travel to anywhere outside this forest,” Franklin said. “But we can take Terran. I don’t think we have a choice.”

“Is that the plan then? Simply follow where his pain levels lessen, then pull out a map?” Armand asked. He wasn’t judging, just trying to figure out what they heck we were saying.

Franklin pulled out some sort of device that had a magical screen on it. “If this was a hyena, he’s going to go toward their old territory, even if he doesn’t go directly to it. I’ll call Marcus, find out where any of their dens are located.”

“They’ve gone north,” I said.

Armand looked to me. “You’re sure?”

I nodded. “Yes, that’s the best I can do at this point, until we start moving. I just feel that’s the direction I’m pulled.”

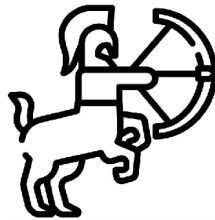
“Okay. Time to put our investigation skills to the test. We might need Marcus here for this.”

“Might? I would say we need Marcus and Blake. He’s our best tracker. I don’t think we have time to call him in, though, ” Matthias said.

“All right, let’s get to work.”

# Chapter 18

Maddox



*The council was who sent me.*

I'd known the council couldn't always be trusted, that wasn't the shocking part of his words. If anything they helped at least bits of this make sense. What had me confused was why they picked this shifter above all others.

I could scent that he wasn't right. There was something off about him, his scent almost sour. Was he sick? Or was he evil? I wasn't sure. For the first time in my entire life I wished I'd paid more attention in biology class. I only half remembered that sour was bad, which I didn't even need that memory to tell me. You couldn't be near him and not sense it. It was so palpable I'd wager that even a human would be uncomfortable in his presence.

"Get in." He shoved me into a van.

He slammed the door shut. Instinct had me trying to open it... trying and failing. It was locked from the inside. Had I not been with child, I'd have risked shifting, ending him even if he managed to shoot or stab me. It would be worth the risk to save my mate. But there was nothing worth risking our baby. Nothing.

The hyena got in the front of the van, protected by a grill. He started the engine and for the first time I feared that maybe he would get me too far away from Terran, a distance that even our heart song couldn't cross. It was one thing if we were going by foot, but vehicles traveled at a speed that was beyond the creator's comprehension at the time.

He started to drive away and I panicked.

"If you go, how will you get my mate?"

"You stupid cat, do you think I want them when they are at full strength? You of all people should know that the chase is half the fun. In that we are alike, you and me. Hyenas and cats both live for the hunt. Your mate thinks I'm the prey, but he's wrong." He cut to the right and I nearly toppled over.

"If I'm dead he can't find me."

"Shut it. He can still scent you if you're gone. Trust me. It's how I found my cackle."

He didn't know about the heart song. At least it sounded like he didn't. At least I had that in my corner.

"What do you mean 'found my cackle'?"

He stopped the van short and I flew forward. “I told you to shut it.” He punched his window, the glass shattering. “Why can’t you fucking listen? No one listens. If they did they wouldn’t be dead. All dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.”

My stomach dropped. He was losing his mind. That’s what that scent was. Hyenas were a hot mess of unstable on a good day. Seeing him like this added a whole new level of terror.

“Dead. Dead like you. Yes. Like you.” He was sing-songing as he climbed out of the van, and for the first time I wished I could lock myself in for real and keep him out. His singing radiated through the broken window. “Dead. Dead. Dead. Bleeding on the forest floor, watering the trees. Then you will listen just like the others.”

I needed a plan. Negotiations weren’t going to work. You can’t negotiate with crazy. You just can’t.

The door ripped open, his hand darted in, and he yanked me out. I didn’t try to fight it. I had to stay alive long enough to warn my mate through our heart song. That was as far as my plan went.

Terran was coming. He was getting closer by the second, but wasn’t close enough to feel more than the pain of our distance lessening. Terran would have to be really close if he were going to hear my warning, but not so close he could be shot.

“He’s coming. I was thinking of maybe keeping you too, but then you made me hurt myself.” He held up his bloody hand. “You are a bad, bad kitty. If we were at my shed I’d give you a potion to make you grow spiders out of your toes.” He

grabbed my face, forcing me to look at him. “You think I’d crazy, that I don’t know what’s real and what’s not. You don’t understand that I have the book—I can make all things happen.”

He pushed me to the ground.

“That stupid lion brother of yours didn’t believe in me either. Nor did my pack. And look where they all are.” He went back into his refrain about being dead. There would be no reasoning with him. He was too far gone. He needed to be ended.

This hyena knew my brother. Was he part of the other groups that were experimenting with the recipes? That would explain the behavior. This hyena was on something. Something bad.

With every breath I took, Terran was closing the distance between us. From my spot on the ground I watched the hyena, waiting for him to be vulnerable, for me to be able to at the very least snatch the gun from him. I’d never used one, but I’d seen them in movies. They didn’t look that difficult to use. At the very least, having it in my hands bought my mate time to kill him.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

I reached out with my mind, trying to reach him. Nothing. And then suddenly it was too late, he was standing in the clearing... alone.



Had Kian told him not to bring the others? Had he done so on his own? Had they set a trap? There were too many variables at play for me to know what my best plan of action was.

“You have taken what is mine!” Terran bellowed.

“He is nothing. I need you. No one wants a war and without one, I have no customers.” He cocked his gun and pointed it at me, while throwing a silver cord that had been hanging round the sheath of his knife. “Put it on.”

“What is that?” I knew better than to speak, and yet there I was.

“Henrick says no talking and no one listens.” He was singing again, and the eeriness of it sent shivers through me. “Hendrick needs another magical leash. Right, kitty kitty kitty? Big kitty. Round kitty. Dead kitty. Dead.”

“I am putting it on,” Terran shouted, and Hendrick snapped his attention back to my mate. “What does it do?”

“Put. It. On.”

Terran did. He looked so wrong being leashed like a common house pet. The silver cord, thin around his neck, already left a red ring on his skin.

“Let my mate go. You have me.”

“Oh, but there are three. One little horsey, two little horsies, three little horsies...” he snapped his head to me, his eyes glued to my belly. “And FOUR little horsies.”

“Kitty. I’m a kitty.” I knew better than to play his games, but anything to distract him from my baby.

He spit on me, mumbling something even I couldn’t hear under his breath.

*My brothers are here. They are circling around. You need to get away from him.*

My mate. I could hear my mate. I tried to tell him I would, but it was like I was blocked. Even my heart song was off.

“I can get my brothers and come back.” Terran stole the attention back from me.

Hendrick bolted in my mate’s direction and picked up the leash, his beast far too close to the surface for my comfort. “How fast can you run?” He tugged the leash, leading my mate to the back of the van.

With his back facing me, I managed to get up onto two feet and took one step back and then another and another. I couldn’t see what he was doing to my mate and try as I might, my mate couldn’t hear my words, the heart song now nearly gone. I felt broken and alone instead of fierce and focused. That would not do. There was too much on the line.

Then out of the corner of my eye I saw Luan. He had his bow drawn. Another step back and I watched as the arrow soared through the air, and there was a thud on the ground. I wanted to rush there, to figure out how to help, but the sound of a second arrow whirling through the air, one not from Luan, had me standing exactly where I stood.

“Terran, his knife!” Apollo cried out, and then there was commotion that ended with stomping.

This time I couldn’t stay still, my legs moving without my permission, and when I rounded the corner, Hendrick’s lifeless body lay there, my mate’s neck now bright red, Apollo pulling the leash from his neck, Luan coming up behind me.

“Terran!” I ran to him, needing to hug him, kiss him, tell him I loved him.

“Stop!” Franklin’s voice appeared out of seemingly nowhere. “Wait for me to touch him.”

The urge to deny him was great, but I trusted Franklin.

“I love you.” I stayed where I was, only a foot from him, and Franklin rushed to him.

“Get away from the hyena. He stinks. Something is... get away,” Franklin commanded.

Everyone but my mate obeyed.

“This leash—it’s for wolves.” Franklin held his hands over Terran’s neck and started to say words that sounded like a mumbled mess. “You will heal quickly now. Go see your mate before he gets shocked into labor.”

Terran took his legs and ran to me, wrapping me tightly in his arms, telling me how scared he’d been and how brave I was and how much he loved me. Tears flew freely from us both, and we stayed like that for a long time.

But then reality came and we had to deal with the mess left before us.

“Who was he? Why did he come for us?” I asked.

Franklin looked to Terran before turning back to me. “I’ll tell you, but technically you’ll have to ask for the official report if you want all the information that Steelwick can share. Ferdy, an eagle shifter who was on the council before he was killed by Armand, gave the original journal to the hyena’s cackle. That is what began this whole mess. Hendrick and his cackle have been working on the recipes, informing others like your brother about them. Some of them died by violence, but I assume more died from whatever concoction had slowly been eating away at Hendrick.” Franklin stared down at the dead hyena, his body literally rotting before our eyes. “Marcus uncovered a lot of this and luckily informed us before we came looking for you.”

Steelwick, specifically Marcus, had found Hendrick’s cackle and took care of them, torching it the way we torched his body and van. It needed to be done. His blood was inside, and it was tainted by dark magics from days of old.

I didn’t ask if they burned the journal or what they planned to do with it if they kept it. I had a feeling the less I knew on the matter, the safer I would be. He was dead now. There were no more of his pack. That was all that mattered.

“So it’s over?” I asked.

Franklin nodded. Terran’s arms tightened around me. “For now,” he said.

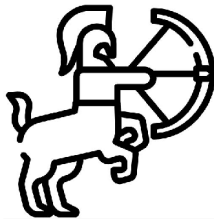
“Take me home, alpha.”

He kneeled down for me and I climbed on his back, hugging him as tightly as I could with my growing belly and kissing him where the redness had now faded to nothing.

“Take me home.”

# Chapter 19

Terran



“So you wish to remain on your territory?” the council member asked.

My mate had asked me the same question, but for different reasons. He hadn’t wanted to sway my decision. I loved that... loved him. But I’d already made the decision. In my heart there were no other choices.

I nodded. “Our forest, yes. This is where I belong—where we belong—where we were meant to raise our young.”

“And you want to be recognized as having an official pack status?”

I nodded again.

Standing in front of the council was not something that I had ever wished to do. I still held anger at them over their lack of assistance to my mate’s birth pride as it fell apart. It wasn’t as

if they didn't know. They had to have. Even we had caught wind of it, they were that notorious in our disasterhood.

When we first began having discussions over the future of my family, my new brothers included, I always assumed it would be Luan in front of them. He was the most eloquent of us. But the transport of a centaur through the human world was not one we were willing to risk again. And unlike me, he couldn't just grow some legs and climb in a car. It made sense he wasn't here, it just hadn't been my plan.

Franklin did attempt to help, but since he couldn't guarantee the process of immediate transportation, whatever that meant, it was up to me to stand here. I wore a pair of brand new jeans and a polo shirt that my mate told me looked professional enough for the council. It was my first time in human clothes and I couldn't say that I overly cared for it. They itched and had threads that poked me in weird places. But I had a feeling I'd be wearing them a lot more often. My mate's gaze roved over me in an appreciative way and I wanted more of that. Shit, I'd wear all the human clothes if he would look at me with such hungry eyes.

The remaining council members looked at one another. The remainder of Ferdy's staff had been dismissed, as well as his predecessor, since it was found that they knew of the journals and never informed anyone. In their place at the moment were two interim positions. I didn't trust them, but then again I didn't trust any of them. With power, rarely followed wisdom.

According to Armand, we could trust them more than I did, but only so much. It wasn't very reassuring. He, like me, agreed that power did interesting things and often not too good things to people. Humans and shifters alike.

"Motion granted," they said after a moment of deliberation.

I hadn't even been paying attention to the vote. And quite honestly I half expected to be here fighting for hours to gain this result.

"You will be assigned a liaison with one of our enforcer packs. I understand that Marcus, who has been working the case, would like to volunteer for the position. Alpha-Elect Armand has approved his request. You will be given an account and funds for any of your initial needs. If you need additional funds or resources, you may apply. Marcus can walk you through the process."

My brow furrowed. Money was not something I needed or ever had. My mate had used it to buy us these human clothes, but what else would we need money for? I didn't know enough about it to argue though. I simply nodded my head.

"Being the small size that your pack is, and that you and your brothers have managed to survive this long without an appointed leader. I am going to assume that at this time you will not be appointing an Alpha?"

I shook my head. "We will continue as we always have."

Putting one of us above the others didn't sit well with any of us. And the council member was accurate. We'd spend many



of their lifetimes working together, the three of us. Why would we want to mess with what already worked?

“Fantastic. Given the nature of what you are and your newly established pack status, please bear in mind that there will be individuals who wish to petition to join your pack or petition to visit and learn more about you. We can hold off those requests for as long as we can while you all get established, but they will come.”

I hadn't considered that. Why would anyone want to join us? I mean, visit to be nosey, sure, but petition to be a part of a pack that didn't have modern amenities? I sort of doubted that. But if they did, we'd figure it out at the time.

“Of course,” I said. “We understand visitors will be want to come.” That was not something we were prepared for, but we had talked about it. Apollo, of course, was vehemently opposed to the idea. My mate, on the other hand, and Luan, wanted to show off our forest. It didn't sound like we had a choice but to allow it, so our opinions were rather moot.

“That is all. Dismissed.”

My mate jumped and squealed, hugging me around the waist.

“It's done!”

“Yes, we can go home,” I said.

“Soon,” my mate said, and I pulled back to meet his eyes.

“You don't think we can make the journey before the night? Are you tired, love?”

“No, it’s just that I have access to my accounts now and there is a little bit of money in there. And I think that I would like to buy a few things before we go.”

“Of course, mate, whatever you wish.”

I’d never been shopping before and I had no idea what to expect, but the prospect made my mate happy and that was good enough for me.

“Perfect. Now I’m going to take you to a place. I don’t think you’re going to like it, but Luan would probably love it. Apollo will never step foot in a place like this, but I think you’ll do okay.” My mate was talking in riddles.

“You’re starting to worry me, mate,” I said with a smile.

“Just trust me.”

“I do,” I said. “With all that I am.”

There were a few conversations to be had as we left the council building; plenty of people were curious, wanted to talk with us and shake our hands. And of course there was paperwork. The council seemed to live for it.

A few members mentioned that they would be requesting a visit. They wanted to know more about us and how long we had lived in that forest. I wish we had more exciting things to tell them, but it seemed that the last thousand years had been a blur. My life really began when Maddox had breached the barrier.

“Mate, if there is anything that you need, I will provide it in any way that I can. Whether it is from these human stores you

want to go to or built with my bare hands.”

Maddox turned to me, his eyes full of love. “I love everything that you have forged for me with your bare hands. Our home, our kitchen, everything. There’s just a few things I need that you can’t make.”

And that was how I found myself standing in front of a wall of pillows. The next aisle over was an equally large display of blankets. The aisle after that had an even larger display of towels.

“I will admit, love, that these are soft, but they simply come from the same animals that I have built our bed out of.”

“Yes, that is true. This is just a little bit different and as this pregnancy progresses, there is a pillow I’m going to want. It’s called a pregnancy pillow.”

“Whatever you need, mate.” I had no concept of what made a pillow “pregnancy” related and my mate was nearing the end of his, but just looking at it had him smiling so brightly, I’d never have refused him.

There wasn’t anything I would need in the store. At least, that was my line of thought, until we got to the kitchen area. With the different knives, pots and pans, and other utensils available, it was hard to know what to look at.

I enjoyed the tools that I had. They worked perfectly fine, but it seemed that humans had perfected the art of building tools for even the smallest task.

“So, this tool right here its sole purpose is to mince garlic?” I asked my mate.

“Yes. That is it.”

“Why not just chop it?” I didn’t use a ton of garlic, but I never found the task of cutting it up too intense.

“This is quicker.”

“This does not look easy to clean.”

“It’s really not.”

“Do you want one?”

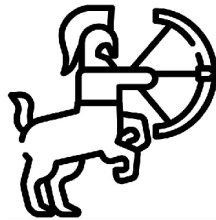
Maddox laughed. “No, the knife we use works just fine for our purposes.”

“But this slicer, that would come in handy. We make a lot of stir-fry dishes. And this blender contraption. The child will need pureed food, yes?”

We left the store with so many gadgets I didn’t begin to understand. But I didn’t need to. I understood the smile on my mate’s face and that was everything.

# Epilogue

Maddox



“Are you sure we have everything we need, Terran?” He looked around the nursery. All of the baby items I picked out had perplexed him at first, but he was soon discovering that babies tended to need a lot more than the adults in their lives.

Ever since I had begun introducing a few modernized things to the house, along with electricity and the internet, it was as if a fountain had been released.

Terran couldn't help himself. He researched modern ideas, solutions, and products. Even if he didn't buy them, he at least found a way to modernize other things he was doing. It was fun to watch him as he figured things out, like he was solving a huge puzzle.

When it came to our child, though, he had a lot of ideas. I'd made the mistake of buying a book about becoming a father

and it filled him with ideas, both from lists in the book itself and from things he extrapolated from there.

I looked at the nursery. It was overstuffed with things that I wasn't even sure our baby would need. No. That was a lie. I was sure that they wouldn't need them all. It was bordering on ridiculous.

The crib, of course, we had built that one ourselves. Modern cribs didn't make room for centaur babies and couldn't contain a cub. But many other things were purchased from the store or online, including many toys I wasn't sure our child would be old enough for quite a while.

"I think we have everything we need," I said. "Scratch that. I promise we do. Now can we please just relax?"

Terran looked at me with concern in his eyes. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, I'm just tired. We've been in here a long time." I was at the point in my pregnancy where every day was a long day. It was hard work growing a baby. At least he had gotten past the point of being able to shift inside me. The pain at his current size if he could shift—I just couldn't imagine it.

"I told you to go sit down." He kissed my forehead. "I will finish getting everything ready."

We had plenty of baby clothes handed down from many of the packs in the area. It hadn't been terribly long since our presence had been made known, but news spread quickly. We

had our fair share of inquiries already. But for the most part, the world continued to go on without too much kerfuffle.

“All right, let’s go rest,” Terran said, giving up on me doing it on my own.

Before I could even begin walking, Terran scooped me into his arms. He was in his centaur form, as he preferred to be while at home. He carried me to the living room where the two of us lay down together.

If any humans walked into our home, they would be so confused by the way the furniture was laid out and also by the dimensions of the pieces. But for us, they were perfect and allowed both of us to be comfortable in the forms we felt like occupying at the time.

“Soon it won’t just be us,” he said, and he laid a hand over my very large belly. I was surprised he hadn’t come already. My pregnancy had already gone past that of a typical lion, but there was a centaur involved in this pregnancy too and I was the first person ever to carry a centaur’s baby. How long he’d stay in there was anyone’s guess.

Immediately, Terran’s hand was met with a thump. Our little soccer player.

“I know,” I said. “I don’t think I’m ready for this.”

He kissed my cheek. “Of course you are.”

With the birth of our child coming soon, Franklin and Mortimer were staying close by. Instead of having campers parked on our territory, we had put together two cabins not too

far from us where guests could stay. It took the pressure off of us and made them more comfortable. It was the ideal solution.

Just as we were getting settled, a knock came.

I groaned.

“I’ll get it, love.” Terran picked me up and set me down on the overstuffed sofa. Another one of our modern purchases. I loved it so much. I could sink in it and spend the entire afternoon there napping, something I found myself doing more and more as the pregnancy progressed.

Franklin came in just as Terran opened the door.

“Oh no, this won’t do,” he said, looking at me.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“You don’t feel it yet? Never mind, I’m a little bit early, but really you should move to the bedroom. I assume that’s where you wish to give birth.”

“Yes. That was the plan. But why... oh, I’m in labor?” Franklin knew things. I understood this from the first time I heard his name, but this... I wasn’t so sure I believed him. I felt fine. Nothing close to labor was happening to my body.

“Yes,” he said with a smile. “You are in labor, trust me.”

“I can’t be. I would feel it.”

Franklin rolled his eyes. “I swear I’m going to start an omega birthing class. Actually, it’s going to be a shifter birthing class. Alphas need to know this shit too. Your animal is holding back the pain for you. Pretty soon though, he’s not going to be able



to hold it back anymore and you'll feel everything. Or maybe it'll be different for you. I don't know. One thing we do want to make sure of is that your child is in human form. Because I am not prepared to help you birth a centaur."

My eyes widened. "I was promised that wouldn't happen. Remember? He isn't shifting anymore. There's no room." I was one hundred percent trying to convince myself of these truths, because right there, watching Franklin, I needed the other options to not be running through my head.

Giving birth was scary enough when you were talking about a baby with two legs, but one with four and possibly horns... yeah, no. That couldn't be a possibility. I refused. "How would that even work?" I regretted the question the second it left my lips.

"If he is in his centaur form, we might just do a C-section." Franklin's words sent terror through my body.

I gasped, my panic rising. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't. Except maybe it was.

"I don't think you're helping, Franklin," Mortimer said when he came in. "Now, let's just get to the bedroom and see what we're working with."

Terran didn't wait for me to protest, he simply lifted me up and took me to our bedroom and lay me on the bed. Franklin put a hand over my belly and closed his eyes.

"Yes, it's almost time, and your baby is cooperating with us. He will arrive in human form."

“Thank the goddess,” I said.

“You’re not kidding.” Franklin blew a bit of hair from his brow.

Within moments, my pain levels had risen. My brow was slick with sweat. Franklin had been right on that. It was like all of a sudden I was in full on labor.

“I feel like I need to push!” I screamed. How was that possible that I needed to push? The books said that could take up to 48 hours with first babies. Fuck it all—the books were for humans. What else had I “learned” that was wrong?

“Go ahead,” Franklin said. “Push.”

“You heard the doctor, go ahead, omega mine. Push.” my mate agreed, squeezing my hand. “I’m ready to meet our son. Aren’t you?”

I nodded. “So ready.”

I pushed and pushed, everyone encouraging me, telling me I was doing well, that I was strong, despite how I was feeling, and promising the pain was nearly over. I felt like maybe I couldn’t handle it, like possibly Franklin’s C-section comment had been more accurate than we all feared. But then with one final push, he was here—his cry filled the air. I was ready to grab him, my arms already reaching for him when he changed to his centaur form right before my very eyes. It took both Franklin and Terran to keep hold of him. Our baby had some spunk. That was for sure.

I gasped. Terran did as well.

“Oh, wow,” Franklin said. “I have heard of shifting soon after birth, but this might be a record for me.”

“Better than five minutes ago.” I laughed as I held my son close his body. It was so tiny compared to that of his fathers. “He’s beautiful.”

He nestled in close and curled his legs under. He seemed to fall right to sleep.

“And apparently he knows exactly where he belongs.” Franklin chuckled.

I barely paid any attention as Franklin and Mortimer helped get me clean and change the bedding. I simply sat with Terran and stared down at our perfect child.

“I want another one,” I said.

Terran chuckled and kissed my cheek. “Perhaps we should wait, dear. It’s only been five minutes.”

“If they’re as perfect as him, I want a dozen.”

“Let’s see how the first week goes.”

“Alright, fine. He’s perfect though, absolutely perfect.”

“Yes he is. He takes after his omega father.”

“Thank you, Terran.”

“Thank you, my love. You are my world. It was so small here without you and you’ve brought life back into my forest.”

I grinned. “In more ways than one.”

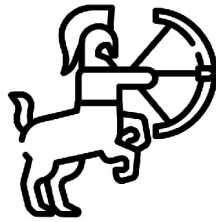
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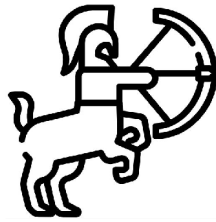
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Dragon's Boxset

# **Directions**

Up to Code

Down to Earth

Back to You

Directions Boxset

# **Shorts**

Alpha Student

Alpha Doctor

Season of Hope